

interzone

APRIL 1999

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'The Sky-Green Blues'

Tanith Lee

Paul J. McAuley

Ben Jeapes

Nicholas Waller

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff



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INTERACTION + INTERACTION + INTERACTION +

Is SF a Feminine Thing?

Dear Editors:

The Westfahl article in issue 140. Oh my...

If Gary Westfahl can convince, say, Joanna Russ, that old-time sf has always espoused female values, I may retract, but otherwise I still insist that pulp sf was extremely masculine in the ways Westfahl seems to be defining it. The super-science epics of E. E. Smith and John W. Campbell glorified war, even genocide. It was anachronistic by the time it was published (1965), but the last Smith novel, *Skylark DuQuesne*, ends with one human being destroying an entire galaxy filled with untold billions of beings, all of whom he finds distasteful. What you will never find in stories of this type is any sense of grief over the destruction and casualties.

When pulp sf dealt with the underdog, it was more often the embittered, but tough outcast of the same sort portrayed by Humphrey Bogart in movies of the same era: C. L. Moore's Northwest Smith and Leigh Brackett's Eric John Stark. That the two best examples are from women writers is, I think, a coincidence. Moore and Brackett were simply better writers. Both characters are loner-cowboys transplanted to Mars, slightly less homicidal versions of Robert E. Howard's outcast-wanderer characters.

Then there was the scientist hero, of the Richard Seaton type (the Skylark series again) who was not only a super capitalist but a great athlete and fighter who gets the girl at the end as a reward, rather like a box of chocolates. I can't count how many pulp characters I've encountered who are steely-eyed, square-jawed, brilliant, rich, and also played football (American football, that is) at college. The lower class version of this is the heroic reporter, less intellectual, but just as quick with his fists, who gets the scientist's beautiful daughter at the end. He got into college on an athletic scholarship, if at all.

These are wish-fulfillment characters, all right, but idealized male role models for adolescent boys. Another characteristic of a pulp hero was that he didn't have many emotions. When Stanley Weinbaum tried to subvert this notion, even timidly, in *The Black Flame*, he got a rejection from then 17-year-old Charles Hornig, assistant editor of *Wonder Stories*, who explained that in the view of many of the "young minds" who read his magazine, "love is a weakness in a man." Weinbaum, then the hottest



writer in the field, could not sell his best novel in his lifetime, even though the novel is (by today's standards) ludicrously sexist and barely adolescent in its views of gender. *The Black Flame* was subversive because it suggested that emotions matter at all. Its idea of gender relations was a whip-wielding dominatrix "tamed" and disempowered by the love of a Real Man. And this is still regarded as a "classic."

No, let me suggest that even the nurturing, comforting view of the Federation in *Star Trek* is not so much a female value, but a male's idea of what a female value is. I'd like to hear from the women about this.

Meanwhile, let me also suggest that the real paradigm for *Star Trek*, particularly in the later series, is that of Tom Disch's poem, "On Science Fiction." All us cripples and rejects must stick together, and we can conquer the universe. Have you noticed how many "special" or "differently abled" characters there are? Geordi is blind, though his visor sometimes gives him the ability to see spectra the human eye can't. Six of Nine is a Borg unit cut off from the collective. Worf is a disreputable Klingon, whose family is in disgrace. Data is a lonely robot, unique in the universe. Odo is an outcast shape-shifter who has lost his ability to shift. Kess is, in effect, terminally ill, because of her species' extremely short lifespan. Dax is half something else, surely not someone who would fit well in normal society. Lt. Kira is a hard-luck case, who lost her childhood and most of her family during the Cardassian occupation. And so on. All these people have their own special pain. But if they conform and join the Collective, er, I mean the Federation, then they will be com-

forted and given a special place, where each can shine according to his, her, or its abilities.

Someone, Isaac Asimov, I think, once commented that we'll know Big Brother has taken over and our freedoms are gone when the government starts censoring science fiction. But nobody is ever going to censor *Star Trek*, even *Voyager*. Its values are establishment values. A totalitarian government might change certain aspects, the template would still prove useful. (Could you imagine what, say, Kim Newman could do with an alternate timeline Stalinist *Star Trek*...?) This is the essential difference between real science fiction and television sci-fi. Real sf would be eliminated.

The closest thing we've got to real, subversive science fiction on television right now is *Red Dwarf*.

Darrell Schweitzer
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Dear Editors:

I was amazed at Gary Westfahl's use of the terms "feminine" and "masculine" to describe the cycle the *Star Trek* series have gone through. His example of TNG's masculine slant is Picard's Borg-like lack of emotion. Is he saying men never show emotions, good or bad, whereas women do? I grasped what he was trying to say, but the dichotomy he's getting at would be much better expressed by, say, "active/passive" or even "human/machine." Kirk and Janeway are both out there on the edge, exploring, leaving their stamp on the universe. Why that should be particularly feminine I don't know, but it is the "human is good" stance most written sf has taken - humanity with all its faults is inherently superior to (or at least more desirable than) the cold, emotionless universe/alien/machine. Using this metaphor, Picard is not, as Westfahl suggests, a "middle manager" because that is something peculiarly masculine (there are women managers), but rather because he is a cog in the Federation machine. It might have been more interesting to explore why that change from the original series to TNG took place - the change in U.S. politics from go-get-'em to rather insecure global cop - and whether this is mirrored in recent written sf as a retreat from the view that humanness should and will always prevail. Besides, Gary, tell me why I'm hooked on TNG and can't stand *Voyager*. Am I just too masculine?

INTERACTION + INTERACTION + INTERACTION +

That said, please keep these articles coming. They're always interesting and provocative.

Rhonda Eikamp
Bedburg, Germany

Final Solution to an Old Argument

Dear Editors:

Further to the discussion ("Interaction," *IZ* 138 and "Reviews," *IZ* 136) about whether Stephen Baxter's *Moonseed* is accurate in suggesting supernovas 100 light years off could cause severe radiation damage on Earth, I see that *New Scientist* (23 January 1999, p16) reports that some scientists believe a gamma-ray burst as far away as our galactic centre would be lethal to life here. Similar gamma-ray bursts going off in other galaxies – at a rate of one GRB per galaxy every several million years in the past, though apparently less frequently now – may be one reason we have seen no evidence of aliens out there: each burst would kill off any intelligent life in that galaxy by means of a large-scale version of re-formatting your hard drive.

Nicholas Waller
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New Layout

Dear Editors:

The re-sizing of the magazine works very well. It makes a rather slender magazine feel more substantial. I cannot, however, agree with you about the new logo. It may be clear but I find it rather ugly, especially in the black-and-white interior version. That said, I didn't particularly like the old logo and the clearer presentation of date, issue and price looks a lot better.

On a separate note, it was a shame to see that Tony Ballantyne followed up his excellent "The Sixth VNM" (*IZ* 138) with the weak and formulaic "Gorillagram" (*IZ* 139). I already had him pegged as the new Dominic Green. Hopefully his next story will be a return to form.

Since this has been a somewhat negative letter let me heap praise on Kim Newman's "A Victorian Ghost Story," an economical, effective and evocative story with a masterful ending.

Martin Lewis
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Editor: Tony Ballantyne's "Gorillagram" may well have been written before "The Sixth VNM." We accepted the two stories around the same time; and, while we liked them both, we decided to lead with the stronger one.

Talking of that other newish writer, Dominic Green, does anyone know where he is? He seems to have performed a disappearing act, and it has been suggested to us that he is probably somewhere in Europe (perhaps the Netherlands or Germany?) working on Year 2000 computer-bug problems. If anyone could let us have a "live" e-mail address for him, or pass the message on that we're trying to contact him, we'd be grateful. Our e-mail address is: interzone@cix.co.uk

Dear Editors:

I must confess that my first reaction to *Interzone's* dramatic new look was a disaffected hum. This wasn't due to any particular gripe but simply because change is nearly always perceived as a "bad thing." Now I've had time to digest the altered format I have found that the "flick factor" (a personal rating I maintain based on the amount of times I thumb through any given publication) has actually risen. The logo is spunkier (if there is such a term) and the magazine itself now fits into my appalling self-assembled book/video cabinet which, like all super-store shelving, suits those curious dimensions that lurk between formats and entirely fails to house anything other than *The Little Oxford...*

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On Ballard and Academe

Dear Editors:

May I add a late word or two to the correspondence about Roger Luckhurst's book about J. G. Ballard? That I liked the book (with certain reservations) is neither here nor there, because the debate would seem not to be about the competence of Luckhurst as a critic, but about the validity of the enterprise in the first place.

We could argue about the roles of critics in genre fiction until the cows came home, and get nowhere. Mike Moorcock makes effective use of the example of author George Meredith – a man who, in the bluntest terms, was ruined by praise – but plenty of authors survive the critical treatment. But I think what we are discussing here is different. Luckhurst's book about Ballard will not affect the latter, either way, because hardly anyone will read it. Although it's not true that *The Angle Between Two Walls* is written in a "nonsense" language (to quote Moorcock) – the terms that Luckhurst

uses are in fact defined adequately – it is certainly the case that Luckhurst's work will be of use to academics and critics, and not to Ballard fans. But there's nothing wrong with that, in my opinion.

My complaints were few, but persistent. In the book, Luckhurst often covers his arse by wishy-washily suggesting that Ballard's books are neither fish nor fowl; and perhaps this approach will be frowned upon. Personally, I would rather have had him thump his fist on the desk a bit more often; but there you go. The book is Luckhurst's opinion, and, all things considered, I applaud him for it. When I read the book I learned a few things about some of the Ballard texts that I hadn't read, and the way that Luckhurst phrased his arguments was perfectly cogent. If you can understand the magazine that you are holding, you can understand Luckhurst's book.

I should add, I suppose, at this point that I am not a friend of Luckhurst's – nor indeed have I ever met him.

David Mathew
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Dear Editors:

Like everything else, literary criticism can be done well or badly. So blanket condemnation of the whole field such as Moorcock's "the jabber of third-rate post-modernists" (*IZ* 140) is knee-jerk prejudice at best. He doesn't seem to have read Luckhurst's study – it "sounds nonsensical" – but already knows what he would think of it.

When Moorcock edited *New Worlds* and encouraged Ballard to write about e.g. Dali ("The Innocent as Paranoid") and the other Surrealists ("The Coming of the Unconscious"), I can remember these pieces being dismissed as "rubbish." The subject-matter and vocabulary were unfamiliar and they lacked what Moorcock rightly calls the author's "poetic narrative." These days they can be reprinted along with many of Ballard's witty, astringent essays and reviews in *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (Flamingo '97).

On another positive note, the most recent study of Ballard by Michel Delville may well be one of the best so far ("Writers and Their Work" series, Northcote House, '98). It is both lucid and intelligent and – this is rare – in the bibliography he has generous words to say about fellow-critics including Luckhurst and Pringle!
John Brady
London

There were the nights, the nights were always green. He had filled the garden with lamps of waxed paper, some on poles, some hanging from the boughs of trees. Inside each one was a candle. The man-servant trimmed, replaced, lit them, at sunset, going up and down the narrow paths, between the palms and the bamboos, the huge rhododendrons and canibaias. As light faded from the sky, instead the garden filled with it, as if it had sucked the light down, the reason for night. And in the darkness, as the crickets remorselessly scratched, the garden pulsed green as jade.

A great moth, with the wing-span of a sparrow, fluttered through the garden, trying to immolate itself in a lamp, any lamp.

"The aperture in these lamps is too small for the big moths to penetrate," he said with satisfaction.

He liked that, cheating a moth of its suicide.

In the verandah, the single oil lamp made his face very yellow. He was old, about 70, or older, carved with wrinkles, a life's work. His name was Lohno Tezmaine.

"You're cruel," I remarked.

"Why? Because I won't let the moth kill itself? Yes, Frances, that's probably true."

But it was more than that. The carving of his face showed his cruelty. It was cruelty, his 70 or more years of cruel jeers and patronizing smiles and frowns, that had formed its present shape.

I thought, briefly, what would mine show, if I lived so long? Indolence, perhaps, incision.

But he said, suddenly, "Laitel says the enemy are almost here. Tomorrow, the next day."

Laitel was the manservant. He heard things when he went shopping in the market for rice, roots, meat and fruit, and other staples of Lohno's house.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"Nothing. What can I do?"

"Get away. Surely you could."

"You mean my machine? But where would I go?"

"The coast?" I suggested.

He did not reply.

We were silent. Then he said, "I take it you have no plans to go, yourself."

"I don't know yet. I'm supposed to stay, I promised I would. That is, as long as you do. But when it comes to the point... I don't know."

"As a woman, you're in more danger. At the worst they'll only kill me. I mean, even if they torture me, I haven't much stamina. Soon over. But you're young."

"Forty," I said idly. "Forty-one next month."

"Young enough," he said. "And we've heard the stories of what they do with females. Alien females."

"Yes. I'll run away then."

"Then should you leave tonight?"

His face was beaky and the cruel lines sharpened. As with the moth, he didn't like to let me have my death.

"No. That isn't necessary."

"Do you want the machine?" he asked abruptly. Was this sinister, this offer?

"I wouldn't be able to drive it."

"Laitel could show you."

"I'm not very good with new mechanical things."

"It would get you to the coast. That's where the air-lift will be. If there is one."

"I'd rather not." Reluctantly I added, "Thank you."

He raised the crystal bottle and poured another pequa for himself, and next for me.

"Cheers," said Lohno.

We drank, and somewhere at the garden's end, where the cultivated wildness dropped down in stony levels to the thin surface waters and the glutinous mudtrees of the swamp, a gurricula gave its long hoarse cry.

"Out hunting," he said. "When the enemy come in things will be easier for it. They lose their skills, you know," he added to me, "creatures, when there are wars. A buffet's laid on for them of the dead. They get lazy. But then I've heard the enemy shoot scavengers."

When I was on the outer stair going up to the roof, I looked down, and glimpsed the gurricula, at the garden's end. Its long pale body, half lamplit and freckled by shadows, was nosing in Lohno's rubbish tip. Presently it pulled out a curious thing that looked like a paperbound book. Either Lohno or Laitel or some eccentric neighbour must have flung it there. With this in its jaws the gurricula loped away, its eyes gleaming. It appeared mindless; ugly and beautiful at the same moment. Animals often look like that to me. And, I confess, other races.

Laitel, for example, with his long eyes, the pupil and iris indistinguishable and black, the inner, bluish lid. His face was a perfect oval, feminine in its hairless smoothness. As with many of his people, his tongue was black, and rough as a cat's. He was slightly shorter than I, slim and small-boned, his skin so white that, when I put my hand upon it, every time I felt a transgressor.

Looking at Laitel, all Laitel's race, I could see no soul in them. Or do I mean, no *physical* soul, the personality.


Despite, or because of that, we had been having sex together almost every night.

My apartment was on the roof, an old summer-house of bamboo, with waxed paper shutters rolled up to let in the humid and unmoving air.

I went in and pushed my things about on the table. Then I sat on the sofa and tried the mobex. Nothing came through but static. The firm, excited voices which had asked me if I would stay to see the fall of the city were blocked off from me by some noiseless electric storm high above, or some powerful ray discharged across the sea. It was possible my communicating link would not clear in time to allow me to deliver a report. I would have to record it, then. Sometime they would be able to access this recording, even if, by then, the mobex were a kilometre down in the swamp, and I in some cove of women, chained at the ankle, and driven southward, in service to the soldiers of the enemy.

Below, the yellow oil-light shifted from the verandah. A patch of darkness formed there, intensifying the liquid jades of the garden.

When I came to the house, to interview Lohno Tezmaine, I had known there would be danger. But I'd wanted to see the city. In the first three or four days, in the mornings before Lohno got out of bed, I'd walked about, or taken the hutshas, pulled by ponies, by men, women or even teams of six children – eight were needed



The Sky-Green Blues

Tanith Lee

for the heavier traveller. So I saw, and photexed, the old mansions of Flower Street, six kilometres of them, like ice sculptures, and the lush gardens with their blazing winter flowers. Also the temples in Que Square, and the fountain, with its columns and serpents, the water playing rather dry and brown that day, but people still drinking from it. I had photexed the Duval Library, the Earthlight Hotel and the Monument to Silence. I did spend one morning in the jush, photexing the shacks and huts, the tin roofs jolly with rust from summer rains, the dyeworks where the swamp is poison-iris-colour. But you see such things everywhere. That was only duty.

Lohno never got up till lunch. Lunch was his first meal. Over scores of little dishes – shoots and beans fried in peanut oil, salt mangoes, scrambled eggs and pig

meat, rice bread, jam, coffee, I placed questions before him. Sometimes he answered them.

Everything was nothing to Lohno. He had done so much. His only goal seemed to be this latent intent one – of preventing others from experiencing anything. On the first morning he had said, in answer to my enquiry

about his daughter, whether he sheltered her so severely because he feared his rivals would harm her, that he was "good at" living, but she had seemed not to be. He added that most of us, of all races and types, seemed to have "no notion of *how* to be alive." And so we were best protected from the state.

"Can you clarify that a little?" I had asked.

"Take yourself," he said at once. He was like a lot of interviewees, I thought, eager to turn the tables at once and humiliatingly get *my* story. But it wasn't that. "Here you are, millions of miles from home, out on a limb. War all round us. A hostile force advancing to take this city. Everything precarious. Why did you come?"

"To talk to you."

"But why? Don't tell me there's still any interest in me. There shouldn't be. I haven't done anything for 30 years."

"Perhaps that's why."

He ignored that. "You came here because you wanted to experience something. A new thing. And that is how most of you are. Either you hide from life or you leap and dive into life. But life is a deep river with a cloudy bottom. There may be carnivorous beasts, venomous fish and rocks, there, under the surface."

"I concede that."

"Do you? This is what I mean. You are all of you amateurs at living."

I said, reasonably I thought. "Then, speaking as a life-professional, how would *you* do it? What would you do?"

He had laughed. "It's like any creative art. It isn't to be taught. Either the gift is there, or it isn't."

Lohno's daughter, he went on to say, had anyway escaped his protection. She had run off with a gangster, and lived in a mean apartment somewhere, bearing him babies. She had had her tongue pierced, he said. And his cruelty-construct face leered.

"That's significant?"

"Think about it."

"I have. The salience eludes me."

He condescended to ask, "For what is a tongue used?"

"To talk, to eat. In sex."

"And it has no bone, does it. But she's put something rigid and hard right through its softness."

I shook my head. "Mr Tezmaine —"

"Lohno, I told you."

"Lohno. I still don't —"

Then he laughed again. "Forget it."

When I had been with him, the first days, I had the urge always, afterwards, to take a shower. That passed. It was a strange reaction. He was perfectly clean, physically, and I preferred to shower first or last thing in the day.

I was in the shower of the summer-house now, when Laitel came into the room.

He made no noise at all, and by that, somehow, I heard him. And then he switched on the ceiling fan, and I heard that.

When I came out in my robe, he was turning down the sheet on my camp-bed. He had put a dish of fruit on the table. There was always some excuse to come up here, in case I didn't welcome him, I thought, or he decided against it.

The fan made its insectile noise, rather like the blades

of the VTO's which would rescue everyone at the coastal pick-up. Or so I had been told.

"Do you have what you want for the night?" asked Laitel.

"Yes. Thanks for the fruit. Is the fan all right?"

"The generator's recharged. Leave it on if you wish."

Apart from the great moths, one of which, or the same one as before, was again sailing anxiously about the green garden, few insects survived in the city. Fall-out from communication rays, supposedly harmless to people, had polished most of them off, even most of the striped ants.

I went over to Laitel, leaned and kissed him lightly. We walked to the bed, discarded our garments and lay down.

This sex was always pleasant, easy and rhythmic, without demanding excitement or any conclusion. Neither of us experienced orgasm. We caressed and moved, comfortably slotted together, until we grew bored, then separating, I with a mild sense of something achieved. Satisfied. If he was, I don't know. I thought I had made it apparent I would do what he needed to achieve orgasm, but he too seemed indifferent. Merely we valued the mutual massage of our bodies. I suspected that, for Laitel, the climax of the act was of use only with his own kind, and in the interests of procreation.

I made tea for us on the battery hot-plate. It was nice to do something for him. All day and sometimes during the night, he had to wait on Lohno, and now too on me.

We drank the tea.

"Did he throw a book out for the rubbish?" I asked. I wasn't really interested. But Laitel said, "Yes. One of his own. Now and then he throws one away."

"I suppose it won't matter. There are copies of all his books in Optimum, all available on disc."

"No, it won't matter."

"Why does he do it?"

Laitel said, expressionless as he always was, "He enjoys to."

When Laitel left me, I recorded this fact with the others.

I had asked Laitel, during our first time alone, what he thought of Lohno Tezmaine. Laitel said, "I serve him."

Although the chip one gets to wear now, in the flesh of the right arm, enables one to understand and be understood in any language, sometimes there are little discrepancies.

"You mean, as his servant."

"His servant." Laitel's voice was not a mask, however. Again, I detected something. I said, "Does he — excuse me, but has he slept with you?"

"Oh no. I don't mean that."

We got no further. It had been as enigmatic as with Tezmaine.

Tonight, before Laitel left me, and I recorded his comment on the book, I had asked the more relevant thing.

"Laitel, if the enemy break through, if the city falls —"

"They will. Yes?"

"What will you do?"

"What can I do?" Lohno's answer. Exactly.

"Come on, Laitel. It's going to be dangerous. They'll be merciless to you — won't they, the enemy?"

"I think so."

"Do you have a family here?"

"No." He added, "I was born in the jush. Not wanted."

"Then you should" – now I spoke Tezmaine's lines – "get away."

"I have no papers, Frances."

"I can print you up some good false ones on the mobex. Enough to pass. Get you to the coast." His black eyes glanced at me. Beautiful, ugly, soulless. Or solely soul. "Lohno said you know how to drive the machine."

"I have done so, sometimes, for him."

"Then why don't you take it, and go? He isn't afraid."

I don't think he'd bother if you went. You'd stand a chance, wouldn't you?"

Beyond the city were the swamps, the secret rivers, mudtrees and boyuns, enormous tracts of jungle packaged over the ruins of haunted temples, where white monkeys and coies were the shrieking ghosts.

"But the airlift," he said coolly, "it's for your kind, Frances. Whens who are wanting to escape."

"It's for whoever they can squeeze in the transports. Believe me, Laitel, I've seen this kind of thing before. And if I give you papers, you'll be fine."

"You," he said.

"I took him to mean, why not me."

"My people promised to pick me up. They said me and Lohno, actually, that was part of the deal. He'd give us the interview and we'd get him out. But he won't discuss that – gave the interview any way – pretends I never offered it. He doesn't care. Or he fancies the experience of the *Vae Victis*."

"Will your people come?"

I thought about it. "Maybe. They usually have in the past. But I should have checked tonight, and the intercom is out."

That was all we said.

When Laitel left, after I'd recorded the thing about the book, I lay under the sheet and watched the ceiling fan.

It occurred to me I might be stranded here. I wasn't afraid. I didn't believe any real harm could come to me. It never had, and I had been in many situations of peril. Somehow there was always an escape clause, a stroke of luck.

Suddenly, out beyond the raised paper shutters, a violent white flare exploded in the sky. Then came a wooden bang, which reverberated oddly, making the light furniture in the summer-house rock.

This had happened 15 times before, once for every night I had been here. They were only signal rockets, put up at irregular hours to disturb the sleep of the city. Reminders from the enemy that they were almost here.

The city would fall like an angel, its stones, gardens, and the accretions of all the aliens who had possessed it and hung on it their jewellery of buildings and fountains, streets and malls. In the firelight, after the close-range bombing began and ended, the true citizens would suffer only a more invasion. I visualized long lines of people driven away before the conqueror, like channels of water running from a tap.

I tried the mobex one last time, got static, recorded my thoughts in a sort of embarrassment, these neatly-quilted

phrases from the handbook of an articulate eyewitness.

In the very late mornings, sometimes a local girl came to the house, bringing garlands of white flowers and long stemmed scented yasti. She would go straight in to Lohno's bedroom on the ground floor, but come out again after only a few minutes. In the verandah she would stand counting coins, then arrange some flowers about the lunch table.

That day she came. I was leaning on the roof-rail, drying my hair. I watched her go in, and then, after less than 50 seconds, come hurrying back.

Looking over, I saw her stop still, in the garden just below the verandah, as if undecided. The sunlight shone on her colourless hair. Then she stared straight up at me. The blue inner lids were shut fast over her eyes, a thing that happens to Laitel's race only in extreme agitation or grief. Next second, clutching her flowers, she ran away along the path and vanished in the rhododendrons.

I hesitated. Then I went down. Laitel was away, I thought, still at the market. These excursions had begun to take much longer. As the enemy drew nearer and more near, less food came in from the surrounding countryside, and fewer people remained to sell it.

The verandah kept its morning shadow, only in the afternoon did full sun reach it. The girl had dropped a single yasti there on the floor, as if leaving us a gift.

Inside, the passage, marble-tiled, swept twice daily by Laitel, gleamed in green sunlight. I passed the double bamboo doors of the dining room and came to the carved palmwood door that marked Lohno's room.

He had never invited me in here. I had never been in the room, though I'd glimpsed it. Now the door stood ajar, something that normally never happened until he had risen, leaving the bed gaping for Laitel to tidy.

It was a white room, a dull sallow faded white. He'd never used blinds but curtains of thin white silk, parchment colour now. Things were strewn about, as I'd seen before, glancing in as, I passed, a leather-bound book on the floor, others over a straw chair. A water bottle stood by the bed and Lohno Tezmaine was stretched across the mattress. There had been insect-netting, and he had left it hanging there, though unclosed. It looked like cobwebs somehow. Or a spider's web, in which he lay.

When I bent over him I saw what I expected. He was dead. Feeling for a pulse, although I did so, was superfluous, and going to fetch the mobex to check for life signs would be futile. The syringe lay under his right hand.

He was smiling. There might be a lot of reasons for that, the fake amusement of setting rigour, or, something in the drug he had used which made him feel good as it finished him. I was inclined to think, though, that he was pleased with himself. A life-professional would assume he knew the perfect moment to die.

His note was under a glass with some dregs of pequa in it. He had written in an obscure picture script that only the chip made me able to read – Laitel, very likely, wouldn't have made it out.

No reason for you to hang about here now, is there? he had written. Take the machine and go. Use the old road. Laitel knows. So long, for now. L.

When I turned, Laitel was in the doorway. If he felt anything, I'd never be sure.

"Of course, he's dead," I announced.

Laitel came and looked. He pointed to the syringe. "He kept it ready. He showed me once. He said, Don't be astonished, one morning."

We left him there, shut the door, and walked back out to the verandah. A horrible whistling note had begun over the city. They were testing the sirens as, during the last two or three days, they had sometimes done, at mid-day and late in the afternoon. Birds in the garden screamed, fell silent, and abruptly flew off with great clappings of wings.

"I suppose that's it," I said. "Could you read his note?"

"No."

"But you can guess what it said?"

Laitel spoke slowly. "I'm to take the money and papers in his safe. Then drive the machine along the old road through the swamp, to the old wall."

"I see."

The sirens shut off. The quiet was a relief. Somewhere a frog croaked and then there was another noise.

Instinctively we looked up, beyond the verandah to the heat-drained emerald of the sky. There was nothing to see, but the droning rushing sound grew insistently louder.

"That wasn't a practice," I managed to say before the concussion blasted out. The flash was only a flicker, simultaneous. The earth trembled.

Somewhere not too near, faint cries, a temple bell ringing.

We waited. Nothing else happened, and the cries gradually diminished, the bell stopped.

"That sounded like the commercial area. It was a Sing rocket," I said. "Popular everywhere." Suddenly I laughed. To my surprise I seemed very slightly hysterical. "I could do with a bloody drink."

Laitel reached out as if to take my hand. His touch would be cool and calming, for a moment.

"Everything's happening at once," I said.

But I had evaded, withdrawn my own hand, and now ran along the verandah, up the stair to the roof.

The mobex gave me an immediate clear connection.

"Hi, Frances. What's the news?"

I told them.

"You don't say? Then I guess you'd like to leave..." A patch of static came, not really interrupting the hiatus.

I waited.

The man's voice said, "Tricky. Storms. How long before they get to you? Our reports give a unit, ten days even."

"No, less. It could even be today. A rocket just came down. They fire a few Sings, don't they, to get us in the mood. Then they march in or chute down. Both."

"Yes. The city government's fled. Guess you know. That was two days ago."

"I know."

"Night pick-up. Private VTO, usual stuff. Nice. Listen, Frances, keep the line open."

Over the summer-house, sudden, with no warning, rushed a vast roaring pterodactyl. Instinctively I threw myself flat. The detonation came next moment with a flash like lightning. The house, everything, shook. Things

cascaded from the table. The chronic untidiness of war.

"That was another. Quite close."

"Heard it, Frances. Keep the line open. Speak to you soon."

The mobex went silent, save for recurring patches of static.

No sirens now. They hadn't bothered. I crouched by the camp-bed, while three more rockets tore over, and three more thunders opened the city.

Finally time passed with nothing. Crickets had started again. I got up. The sky was bruised. Smoke from the bombardment rose in three or four thick columns beyond the palms and sul trees that shielded the front of Lohno's house. Screams and wails still rose irregularly up in it, and long glissandi of tumbling glass.

I took the mobex with me when I went down, and dumped it on a straw chair in the verandah. Laitel was putting dishes on the table, rice and spinach, slivers of meat in sauce, the big bottle of Pinôt Grève Lohno always had at lunch, in a cooler.

After a moment, Laitel said, "They will come?"

"I don't know. Yes. I'm not sure."

I sat down, picked up my napkin, looked at the food.

Laitel poured a glass of wine for me.

"Please sit down, Laitel." He looked at me. "Oh sit down. He's dead. The city's being bombed. Have some fucking lunch with me."

He sat and ate, and drank a little wine. It seemed familiar, as if I had somewhere seen a photograph of him eating at this table, and so wondered if he had, with Lohno, quite often, before I arrived.

Although I drank two or three glasses of the wine, it made little impression on me. Laitel rose and went into the house, and returned after ten minutes with coffee. He served me, then sat again. He said, "A boy came to the front verandah just now. He had a dead aie bird. He said it was killed when a rocket hit one of the gardens." I looked at Laitel, not comprehending. "He said we could have it, for food. No payment necessary."

"So?"

"He was staring all the time into the house, to see who is here. We are only two or three persons. He will tell others, and they'll come back."

"I see. Looters."

"Taking what they can, before the enemy come. And they will know about you."

I glanced at the mobex, half reached out for it, and let my hand fall.

Over Lohno's walls and trees, a new dim sound was beginning to well through the city. It was febrile, almost festive. I'd heard such noises before. I pictured the crowds on Flower Street, windows that had survived the Sings, smashing.

"Will you take the machine, Laitel?"

"Yes. I've seen the papers in the safe. They will do."

"Can I come with you?"

"Yes."

I got up. "Let me put a couple of things together."

"Don't be in a great hurry," he said. "They won't come back until it's cooler. Maybe not till sunset. I'll see to the machine."

It didn't occur to me he would go without me. I don't know why not. What was there between us? The palest sex and a communication chip.

As I stuffed my bag I thought of the flower girl. I was sorry for her. I wondered if Laitel were washing the lunch dishes, the glasses, carefully by hand as he usually did, but when I came back down, they were still on the table, and a tiny contingent of ants had appeared, crawling over the plates, drowning in the last centimetres of wine.

I picked up the mobex: static issued from it. I spoke my plans into the recorder-relay, the plan of Lohno's machine and the journey to the coast, then turned it off. I knew, they wouldn't have come.

Over the sky a narrow flying craft leisurely drifted. It might have been a spy-plane of the city, but I thought not. Enemy reconnaissance. The sun was passing over and the shadows lengthening out from the cunibaías, where lema-sets were playing now, the silvery boughs dipping and swaying as they sprang.

Laitel appeared below. "We'll go now, if you're ready."

"Yes."

He had nothing with him. Perhaps he had nothing of his own, wanted nothing that wasn't his own. But he said, "The machine is primed. I've loaded it up with food, and gas. I've put Lohno's gun into the compartment."

We walked along the narrow garden paths, threading between the waxed-paper candle lamps, which tonight nobody would light, the moths searching in vain for death. Death instead would be in Lohno's bedroom, with tiny trickles of ants foraging over him. Or the gurricula might get in at a window.

Or the house, ransacked by the neighbours, the boy with the aie bird, might be burning, so giving the moths a chance after all.

Out of its port, the machine squatted below the stone levels, on the edge of the old road where the swamp level. It was camouflage green, sky green and green-

tawny, like the jungle-forest, the mudtrees and boyuns and palms. It had a look of power, armoured, muscular and big-snouted like some beast. This vehicle had been regularly cared for, oiled and exercised, its batteries charged and fed. Not wild, only savage, then, an expensive dray animal.

I went up the metal ladder and swung into the cab. Laitel took the driver's seat. He closed the machine's transparent armoured lid.

The house was invisible from here. A great quiet, a Sunday quiet, had descended over the city, which might only have been resting, dozing after an opulent family meal. Starlings flickered across the sky, two lema-sets cackled in a giant rhododendron.

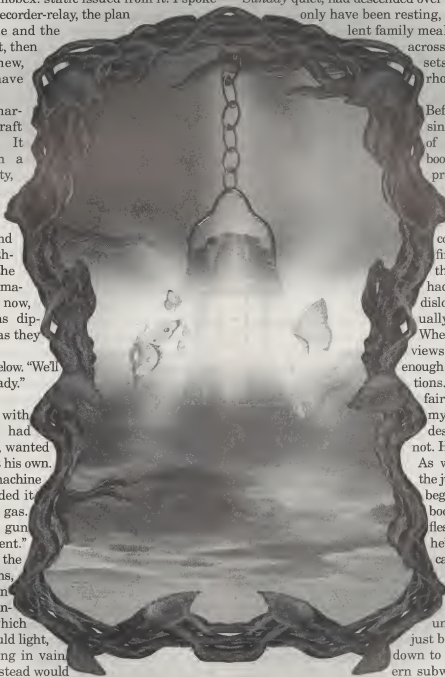
Before I came to the city, since I hadn't read any of Lohno Tezmaine's books, I had to use a pre-programmed tutor to speak them over to me in sleep. Following these sessions, consciously I hadn't at first remembered anything, though my sleep had been peppered with dislocated dreams. Gradually the input settled. When it came to the interviews with him, I had enough to ask the right questions. Nevertheless I was fairly sure he suspected my method. Had he despised me? Probably not. He was indifferent.

As we went deeper into the jungle, only then, did I begin to see Lohno's books, as it were, made flesh. Obviously, the ones he'd written after he came to live in the city.

On my arrival I hadn't seen much, only a map-like image unfolding under me just before the swift glide down to the airstrip. A modern subway capsule had run

me into the city - Europeans built it, this subway, the Grande Metrolux. They'd been proud of it once, like their library and the handful of mansions in period style, which they planted on Flower Street. But everyone had left markers there, Rus, Statesiders, Afro-Celt, Exastra.

Once war had washed over, destroying and processing small, the jungle itself would lay claim to the city, and then the city would go back to being like the rest,



like the landscape we had now entered.

At first the old road coiled through the swamp, and then came a shanty town, the tin roofs and huts like the jush, but better, worse, broken up by trees and water and bubbling marshes railed with clacking reeds. The old wall carved across everything, ruined, and ancient almost as prehistory. Strong lemon light of a dying afternoon slid on the stones as the machine, oblivious, bumped through a gap. Our treads made nothing of the little shards and large smoothed pebbles. A turquoise fisher-bird stood sentinel by a pool, staring at us as we left the city behind and entered the funnel of the forest.

At first, impressive, the huge flags of apparently tarnished, heavy bronze, the leaves of plantain and gigantic, full-grown boyun. Flags indeed, banners sweeping and scraping on the machine's dome. Towering trees roped with lianas that would eventually strangle and pull them down. In flights of firework brilliance, parakeets went spraying up between, to be lost in the higher thinner canopy, where still, for about half an hour, glimpses of sky were visible, luminous yet flat-looking, like *trompe l'oeil*, a painted ceiling.

Then the overhead vista closed.

The machine ploughed on without pause, breaking through tender angelica creepers, snapping the boughs of cunibaia and black fig. Here and there, the automatics, meeting tougher growth, produced a whirl of blades and sliced vegetation. Green blood sprayed on the front screen of the dome, and was instantly wiped away.

Shade had deepened to the night-day of the jungle-forest. But hours had passed. Soon true night would come. Darkness.

"After dark we'd better stop, Laitel, had we?"

"Yes, I think so. Certainly tonight."

The machine lights were vital. Their heat if not their beam might be detectable by anything watching from the sky. How dedicated the enemy were to detaining all peoples in the city I didn't know. Perhaps not very. With me, an alien, they had no real quarrel. But I was on my own, and travelling with one of the enemy's enemies.

It seemed such an easy rule to follow, to turn off the machine once night came, crawl through into the rear compartment and sleep until sunrise. Not even any awkwardness. We had slept together, in both senses, many times already.

Claustrophobic, though, the jungle-forest. And then, every so often, a sort of agoraphobia – a break in the forest with a view of cascading rock and leaning, half-falling trunks, bamboos like waterfalls of liquid fabric, some defile far below, twice with a tribe of blond monkeys, their shouts of alarm clearly audible above the machine's low humming, the steady soft pump-pump of the gas mixture.

I had asked if there was enough fuel to reach to coast. Laitel told me he thought so. Besides, we might be able also to charge the solar panel in some clearing, when we were farther from the city and possible surveillance.

Once, kilometres, years, behind us, there came a faint prolonged boom. But it might only have been some liana-slain tree collapsing in the forest, deceiving us, natural and quite near.

Night fell. No, it seeped, like water. Exiled from Lohno's green night garden, here the blackness poured and filled our cup.

We switched off the machine and went through to the rear on hands and knees. After using the chemical toilet, I did stretching and loosening exercises on my mat. Laitel, moving on his knees as if accustomed to nothing else, put out some cold food and uncorked an evening bottle of wine.

Later, we lay down. By some mutual reticence, after all not together. We would have little private space during the journey. Only lying alone on our mats, a couple of metres apart, could we achieve any.

We hadn't spoken much. Now I said, "The travel-time computes as four days. Five, if vegetation makes for very hard going."

"This is the dry season. Growth is less. Four days, perhaps."

I said, as he had, previously, "There's plenty of time. They'll wait."

They would, because we would be among the first of the last groups. For the records, rescue must be shown to be at least partly effective. Even if they didn't wait, from the open land by the ocean escape must always be easier. Even my people would come, there. I had asked Laitel to let me see the papers Lohno had left for him – and not mentioned in the post-mortem note, presumably having promised earlier. They were good for anything, I thought. I'd been startled in a way Lohno had bothered. Then not startled. He had been so very conscious of our amateur status.

Soon I heard Laitel sleeping, the slight rustling in respiration he made, asleep. I lay on my back, and through his breath and the shell of the machine, I heard the crickets, and now and then a sharp scream from the forest. I thought of gurrucilla circling the vehicle with neon eyes. The jungle was alight with such eyes. Eyes hung in trees and the bodies of moss sloths, scrambled and leapt in the heads of coies and monkeys. The pinpoint spangles of rodent eyes scuttled over a floor of roots and bones.

Visualizing it, I saw them in a speeded-up motion. As in those old photographs of traffic on the Champs Elysées or, torch-bearers running on Ho Lilly Way. Streaks, streamers crossing and re-crossing, radiant threads in a labyrinth.

In the morning, at first light, we went on.

We talked, even exchanged confidences, that day. It was from boredom, a sort of makeshift antidote to the slight panic I felt keep rising in me, a restless fear of enclosure, inactivity and ennui. For him, the same? Perhaps he talked only to humour or help me. Did he need to talk at all?

Neither of us, I thought, had anything very original to reveal. Our stories were inevitably products of our places of birth, conditioning, natures. To harshness, tied by rules of social etiquette and religion, and, of course, deprivation, his nature responded, it appeared, with acceptance and calm, nearly uninterested. I suppose for me too, the rules and the dragging up, though different ones – wanting things I couldn't have – material things,

but also glamour, power, success. And my nature was very unlike his. First resentful and at last "sceptical." A still-hot, calloused nature, though even now wanting, slyly, life to woo me back: See, we didn't mean it, here is the reward, the prize. And knowing too I didn't deserve the bloody prize. So. Laitel shone translucently like a dim white pearl. Frances was more garish, costume jewellery, just tinged with jaundiced yellow. Once in a bar someone who claimed to see my aura told me it was shot with anger the colour of fire. Rather than chasten me, I'd been proud of that. Anger, why not?

After we'd talked – memories, insignificant events – a first bicycle (his), the first date (mine), our work – which had produced both bicycle and first date – servants, both of us, too, in differing, humiliating ways, although he was not humiliated, only I was – we became silent again. But we had got rid of another day.

Then it was time to crawl into the rear of the machine. And something was disgusting about it now, the proximity, and the smallness of the space. Our smells – mine chemically wiped and deodorized for "freshness," turning stale, his odourless. A *smell* of odourlessness. Disturbing. His race don't sweat. Or if they do, not as my race does. His face, Laitel's face, was becoming almost genderless to me, exactly like the face of the flower girl who had run away from Lohno's body, and all the other indigenous faces in his city. Only when they were old, incised by wrinkles, the white teeth, which had no canines, falling or pulled out, only then had there been any look of *living* in the faces of Laitel's people. Not really even then. Ugly, beautiful. I thought of the old, old woman I had seen dip her clay cup in the soiled water of the fountain in Que Square. Shrunk small as a European or African child, she might have been sculpted from almond wood, an artefact, those lines and fissures made deliberately by skill, for artistic admiration, not randomly out of pain and age.

Somehow we edged – or only I did – our mats further apart. We had drunk no wine. The rice had been sticky, and despite the storage unit, hard. A packet of luxury biscuits a sickly cliché out of place.

His whisper-breathing, when he slept, irritated me. I wanted to wake him up, shut him up. I heard unintelligible words in the whispers, then sounds in the air between them. But there were no real sounds that night. Crickets sometimes. A vague constant rumble we had heard from the moment the machine was switched off, a great waterfall, he said.

Later though something jumped on to the dome, monkeys or lemasetts. Thumps and skitters, the squeak of claws on impervious transparency.

The equation on the mobex had informed me there was only one more day needed to reach the coast, and Laitel had seemed to think the noise of the fall – the Water-Mama, he called it – confirmed this. But that would mean the mobex's first computation was wrong. So why not this one?

When I woke again, it was late in the morning; instinctively I knew. And once I had crawled forward, I saw. One of those breaks had come, this time a vast clearing.

The machine was stopped on its edge, screened off only by clumps of bamboo, a flimsy curtain of vines. I hadn't noticed, somehow, the previous evening, in the failing dusk.

Here, the perimeter of the clearing was richly green, but running to tobacco-brown farther, off. The jungle only came in again, I thought, over a kilometre away. Some little deer were feeding in the middle distance, and there was a ripple of heat haze. The sky was very bright, cat's-eye colour. Almost midday then. I could no longer hear the fall.

Neither of us had left the machine before now. There was no need to. Every psychological need to. But without discussion, both of us had seemed to decide to go outside was foolish. The jungle-forest, in Laitel's language the *lunga-rook*, is treacherous. Quicksands, poisoned plants and snakes, gurricula, boar... an endless list of don'ts.

But now, Laitel had gone out. He must have done, because the machine, including the toilet and the storage space, was empty. I opened the front compartment. It was filled by batteries and tools for the upkeep of the machine. Lohno Tezmaine's gun lay slimly alongside.

I sat in the front seat, turning slowly, looking through the dome into the clearing, and the forest behind us, what I could make out over the machine's streamlined back.

Laitel had left the vehicle, and was not to be seen. Had vanished.

A story I hadn't bothered to tell him: when I was a child, in my own city, unthinkable wastes of time from here, I'd been left with some relative for an afternoon. I was about five. As it turned out, the relative, an aunt, either real or titular, hadn't been reliable. Rather like wicked female kin in fairy tales, she had taken me to the park, gone off to buy something, cigarettes I seem to recall, and not remembered to come back. Unnecessary to itemize the stages of my bewildered and tearful panic, the gibbering little near-foetus I eventually became, under those pruned cedars of Hurlingham. Near closing time, a park warden found me. He took me with some trouble – I'd been told never to go with strangers – to the park admin. Here I was rescued presently by a parent.

It shook me, sitting in the machine, sitting there with the blistering near-noon sunlight coming through the dome, shook me. Laitel gone, and I was that child again. The park, the jungle, the *lunga-rook*. Don't go with strangers.

For God's sake, I couldn't drive this thing. I didn't even know, and couldn't work out, which button would polarize the dome and stop the glare.

But come on, I'd been in worse situations. Hadn't I? Seldom quite alone though. My own kind had been with me. Or another sort of stranger, the sort one believes, for that short period, is an ally, a companion. Or I'd known my way. Had a vehicle I was familiar with, a terrain I was accustomed to or had learned from a tutor. Or no, no, surely there had been times like this. That cellar in Shovsk, that farm at Penn – had I been another person then? Yes, because now I was the child.

I pushed my panic down.

He hadn't gone far. Why would he? Perhaps to verify the

fall was there. I could just hear its rumble after all. Somehow the intrusion of other senses – sight, distress – had blocked it out. What reason could Laitel have to leave the safety of the machine in any permanent way? It was his ticket to safety, as it was mine.

Then again, perhaps he had meant to be gone only a few minutes and something had happened. One of those *don'ts*, the reasons for never straying outside.

I picked up the mobex. Static was worse, as it had immediately become once we entered the jungle. I recorded Laitel's disappearance. My voice sounded steady, unconcerned.

Then I crawled back into the rear compartment. I'd eat something. Prepare myself... About ten minutes later, as I was nibbling a bread cake, I heard a noise on the ladder, then at the cab door. An animal? The door opened, as it only would to a registered handprint.

I was going to yell out. Relief was flooding through me like boiling then icy water. I paused, and called quietly, "Hi-Where were you?"

No one answered.

Then I was frightened. Not the child, other horrors. Was it possible – some battalion of the enemy – Laitel taken, leading them here... I scrambled forward, wishing I'd thought to keep the gun with me.

Sunlight still blared through the cab. The driver's door was pulled wide, and below, among the cream and green of the bamboo, Laitel was waiting, looking up at me. Alone.

"What in Christ's name are you playing at? What do you mean by it? Why the hell didn't you wake me – tell me you were going to go out? Why don't you speak for Christ's sake?"

"Come and see the fall, Frances, the Water-Mama."

"Fuck the fall, what –"

"It isn't far, Frances. Come. Come with me."

Irradiated in my mind, four words: Now he is crazy. Was he? He seemed the same. Enigmatic Laitel, gentle Laitel, the blink of his black tongue between the pale slender lips, the herbivorous teeth of a race that, however, ate meat. The blue inner lids were well raised, only an ink-drawn rim about the eye's white, the inner black. I'd better be reasonable?

"Laitel, come back up. I shouldn't have shouted – I don't know how it translated. Sorry if it sounded like I was insulting any of your gods – I wasn't. Only mine. Let's talk. I was having some breakfast."

"Don't be afraid, Frances. Over there, through the trees, you can see it."

My hand had touched open the front compartment. It slipped quickly around metal. I couldn't drive Lohno's machine, but I could use his gun. Weapons, somehow, were always easier to learn. I raised it, as if examining the barrel.

"Laitel, I think you should come and have some coffee. Did you eat?"

Then Laitel laughed. I'd never seen him laugh, not even in sex, or from nervousness – but then, when had he been nervous? The laugh was musical. Like music. He turned and walked away, back through the loose net of creepers, which he didn't break, on to the verdant periphery of the clearing.

"Laitel! Laitel!"

His profile over his shoulder, half looking back. He shrugged, and walked on, away from me. The way someone does with someone else who is being stupidly obstructive or recalcitrant. Someone not bad, but impeding, for those moments. Someone who you'll probably forgive, later.

"Oh God."

Only, otherwise, the deer in the clearing, grazing.

I kept hold of the gun. The door had established my handprint as it had Laitel's, so I closed it when I got out on the ladder. I jumped down.

The ground was hot. I could feel it through my boots, and the humidity was intense, far worse than in the city or the garden. Water-drops formed at once on my hair and lashes, trickled down my face – perhaps too it was the nearness of the waterfall, which, out here, seemed suddenly to roar.

He wasn't moving fast. I soon caught up to him.

"What is this, Laitel?" He didn't speak now, or look at me, but he was slightly smiling. "Why is the fall – the Water-Mama so important?" No answer.

When we got free of the stands of vegetation, the noon sun was overpowering. The haze rippled, rippled, so the singed grass was like a lake, and the feeding deer seemed to be floating or swimming in it.

But we got closer and closer to the deer. They didn't stir. Hadn't they seen us? Scented us? Especially the scent of an alien –

"Laitel, why aren't the deer –"

"It's all right," he said.

And then, we were walking right by a deer, a mother, feeding with her fawn beside her. The baby didn't look up; she flicked us one glance, her ears, full of the juice of youth, fleshy, like leaves, twitching once. Then she lowered her head again.

We walked between all the deer. Some, this one, this, were less than half a metre from us. And now, compelled, I put out my hand, softly, disbelieving, ran it over the harsh velvet of deer haunches, and the head turned slowly. I glimpsed the long, purple eye – careless, returning to the grass. They smelled of grass, of herbs and fresh dung. Not for a second of fear.

We were in the middle of the great clearing. Above, the sky, singing out its daffodil green heat. The rumble-rush of water. Some sort of tension in the air, beyond temperature, or haze.

"Laitel... what is it? – what?"

His hand came out and took my hand, my left hand, which had stroked over the hide of the deer. I hadn't let that happen at the house. I'd let him kiss me, lick my skin, penetrate me, but not hold my hand in his. He was cool as melon, his palm not dry, not moist, the long fingers wrapping mine. And in my other hand, the hard gun.

Where the trees and shrubs began to close in again, he turned left, drawing me with him. And then we went down an avenue, a kind of path, like the paths in Lohno's garden. It might have been some lane or by-way of the city, a grassy walk off Flower Street. As we moved along it, a gurracula paced out of the trees on one side, crossed the track before us, and went in among the trees the

other side. It was like a shadow, almost I seemed to see through it, but it was real. The size of a large dog, full-grown. It could have killed both of us with ease, or also I could have shot it, I suppose. It hadn't spared us a look. And we – neither of us – had slowed down or hesitated.

The avenue ended and the trees opened out, giving way to slender shiroyas with their dainty paper-chains of foliage, and beyond the land hollowed, dropped, and there, hung in vastness and distance, and below, a cliff of malachite wreathed in steam and haloed by spray, and the great fall of Water-Mama, a woman's crumble-white hair combed down and down to a shining river like an olive serpent half the world beneath.

It was beautiful. And the noise of it, and the taste of its spume, mineral as iron on the mouth.

We stood, looking. What else. It seemed, as I'd meant to be when trying to call him back, *reasonable*. This mattered. Or rather, nothing else did, much.

To one side, Laitel's side, the rock shelved up, with the shiroyas clinging, trailing their streamers. One of the old derelict temples was there, with the beehive tops I'd seen in photex prints of Calor Eye, or Angk. Stone galleries wove in and out the rock, trooped by statues, their faces mostly smoothed away by time and wet.

As I stared, birds flew up and swirled across all the faces, the statues', the temple's.

Our hands had let go. At the same instant I must have dropped the gun. It lay in the fern at the ground's edge.

Laitel knelt down, his knees and calves folded under him. I gazed at his hair, that colour which is no colour I can name, the hair of his race, which never changes even in extreme old age, one hundred, one hundred and fifty of our years.

I felt very tired. I wanted to sit, too. So I sat, beside him. I crossed my legs and leaned my elbow on my thigh, my chin on my hand, curved forward, gazing over to the narrow river like a snake.

When it began to get dark I don't know. Sunset, presumably. I must have slept, but I hadn't moved.

Firebugs burned softly in the bushes, darting about like all those gleaming eyes I'd imagined, but now unencumbered by heads or bodies. I had an urge to coax them to my fingers. Would they come?

Stars were strewn over the sky, hardening as the light disbanded. But the sky is always less dark than the world. The starry night of space. So, could I coax down the stars?

"Laitel, we should go back to the machine."

But when I looked at him, once again, he was no longer with me.

Lohno had described this spot, or another like it, in several books. The image was recurrent – the Water-Mama Fall, the temple. Therefore, I must have seen it in post-tutor dreams. It was subtly familiar. However, I'd only realized this when I woke there, and again found Laitel had gone.

I picked my way by quite an easy path, not even very slippery from the spray, up among the trees, to the temple's first terrace. Through squat-bellied pillars, inside a cave-like hall, an eerie lamp was glowing. And I knew, as I'd known suddenly about the path, that this wasn't

as bizarre as it seemed. A great globe of translucent vitreous had been set, centuries ago – as in these most ancient jungle temples now and then it was – over a small fissure, under which flickered or flared a pocket of gaseous phosphorescence from some underlying swamp. Marsh-fire. An intermittent yet ultimately constant light, which needed no tending.

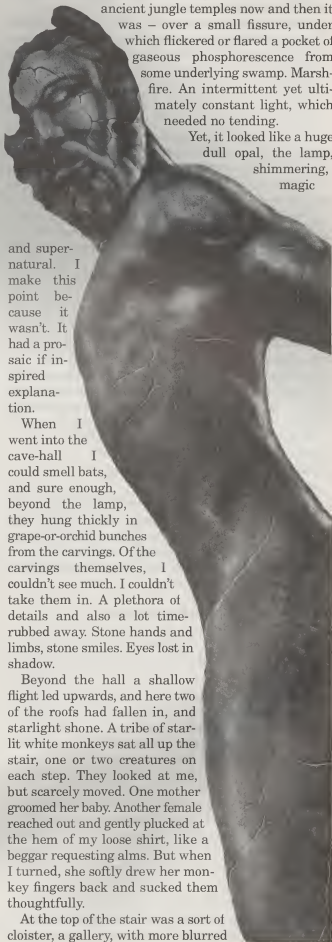
Yet, it looked like a huge dull opal, the lamp, shimmering, magic

and supernatural. I make this point because it wasn't. It had a pro-saic if inspired explanation.

When I went into the cave-hall I could smell bats, and sure enough, beyond the lamp, they hung thickly in grape-or-orchid bunches from the carvings. Of the carvings themselves, I couldn't see much. I couldn't take them in. A plethora of details and also a lot time-rubbed away. Stone hands and limbs, stone smiles. Eyes lost in shadow.

Beyond the hall a shallow flight led upwards, and here two of the roofs had fallen in, and starlight shone. A tribe of starlit white monkeys sat all up the stair, one or two creatures on each step. They looked at me, but scarcely moved. One mother groomed her baby. Another female reached out and gently plucked at the hem of my loose shirt, like a beggar requesting alms. But when I turned, she softly drew her monkey fingers back and sucked them thoughtfully.

At the top of the stair was a sort of cloister, a gallery, with more blurred



statues, which passed around a court below. But one side of the court had dropped away, and there one saw again the perfect view of the fall.

I hesitated halfway along the gallery, because a night bird was singing. It was the nightingale heard everywhere in Europe, Asia. Here? Perhaps the song was different in certain ways. Some notes stressed or distorted, bell-like, strident. But that bubbling trill, just the same.

Another of the phosphorous lamps burned down in the court. Some fluctuation of the gas made this lamp flutter, and the temple stones shifted, *seemed* to shift. And Laitel was there, walking towards me. He wore a white tunic and white pants, just as he had my first days at the house in the city. But he hadn't worn such clothes in the machine.

"Come this way, Frances."

What was the point in saying anything? I followed him on along the gallery, and part way around the cloister, and then into a roofless, narrow corridor. There were, in the starlight, many doors of carved sul-wood, burnished like dirty amber. Laitel opened one, and I saw into a small bare room lit by an oil lamp on a table that was otherwise covered by books and papers. At the table sat Lohno Tezmaine. I knew at once his ochre parrot face, of cruel aged-in-the-wood malevolence.

I wasn't dreaming. As infallibly, sometimes, you know yourself to be clearly awake in dreams, somehow, when awake, your very unsureness proves this is the woken state.

"How are you here?" I asked. I was casual.

"Where else? Besides, where is Here?"

"Aren't you dead?" I casually asked.

"In one form," he said.

I had the idea that of course he wasn't dead. That Laitel had stored Lohno, perhaps sedated, in some extra hidden compartment of the machine, at the same time that he stored the food, fuel and wine. Why?

"Our interview was fairly naff," he said, old-fashioned still, "wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"You weren't really interested in me."

"No?"

"You only inclined to see the city and be involved in the horrors of downfall. At least somewhat. Come and look at this."

I didn't want to approach him, but that was foolish, because he was just an unpleasant old man sitting on an upright deck-chair, in the cell of a ruin. So I went closer and he pointed out the papers in front of him.

"What about it?" I said.

"Read it. Oh, I know you never read my books. But this is my latest work."

"Continued after your death, too? That should be very interesting, a great potential commercial success."

"The first book, certainly, I've written for over 30 years."

The full light of the oil lamp was on the manuscript. I leant forward, and read the paragraph written there. It said:

"She didn't want to approach him, but that was foolish. He was simply an unpleasing specimen of masculine old age, upright on an inappropriate canvas chair,

the kind once set up on the decks of liners for the elderly and sick, so they might enjoy some ocean air. But Frances was that intransigent and irritating thing, a survivor. So she went straight up to him and, when he asked her to, read the paper on the table."

I said, "You're writing about me. That's actionable, Mr Tezmaine. You've even used my given name."

"Lohno."

"Mr Tezmaine, I find it impossible to believe that all this is an elaborate hoax, arranged simply to make a fool of me and the people I work for —"

"Lohno. You don't understand. You probably will not, will never understand."

He drew another paper out from the untidy stacks on the table. He held it up to me. When I didn't look or take it, he read, "She had always wanted to see the city; that had been, really, her only reason for agreeing to interview the old man. In the first days, in the mornings before he got up, she would walk about, or take a hutsa. Being of fairly light build, a team of only six children was needed to pull her along. She always tiptoed them well, but not so extravagantly that they clamoured or brought others to clamour. She had learned long ago, in the cities of Asia, to be careful of such things."

He let the paper fall and pulled out another. He read, flatly, "Sex with Laitel was always strangely satisfactory. There was never any frantic struggle towards orgasm. It was a politeness between them, a social massage. But Frances suspected Laitel reserved climax, and the expulsion of seed, for women of his own race, in the interests of procreation."

"All right," I said. "Am I supposed to be affronted? Disgusted? Upset? What? You tell me."

"Yes, I would have to, wouldn't I?"

"Because I'm an amateur at life?"

Laitel was in the room. He was pouring pequa into two glasses, and then he brought them to us, handing Lohno Tezmaine his drink first.

I took my glass then put it down. I put my hand on the papers and pulled out, at random, another sheet, lifted it and read, from the filled, scribbled page, "As a child, she had been left with an unreliable aunt, real or titular, who, going to buy cigarettes, forgot Frances in a park. Under those pruned cedars of Hurlingham, Frances experienced the first of her massive disillusionments. But life would never encourage her to learn its true ways, instead slapping her down at every opportunity. And yet, still, she unwisely wished that life would change its mind and woo her back. There was still time, she was only 40, 41, for life to give her fame and glory, the crown of laurel, the undying name."

"How do you know?" I said. I felt blank and stern, almost righteous, not at all unnerved. As if I was playing a part.

"How do you think I know? The same way that I know that Laitel was born in the jush, an unwanted child though a boy. And, how I know that, at seven years old, he saw a white tiger, in a cage, and thought it was a demon, and that he still dreams of this tiger, which species isn't, of course, normally found here."

"You know that then because Laitel must have told

you. But I –"

"Laitel told me. You have told me."

"No."

"It's self-evident. How else can I know, Frances. And your mother's middle name, say. Or the story about the three little mice that made you afraid when you were nine. Or how many men you've slept with."

"I don't know that myself," I said archly.

"You do. If you think about it, you do. Otherwise I couldn't know."

"Telepathy, you're saying then."

"In a way, I suppose. A sort of telepathy."

Laitel spoke quietly. "He does know, Frances."

"He's dead. I tried his pulse. He's dead so how can he know anything?"

"You never read my books," said Lohno again, and again without the usual authorial arrogance or contempt. "You had them read to you instead by a mechanism. You've forgotten, or didn't notice, that sometimes I include myself in my books, as a character. I write first-person, and am addressed by various other characters as Tezmaine, or Lohno. Preferably the latter. I am, after all, so familiar with my characters. Any writer is. Indecently so, though inevitably. The least I can do, Frances, is generally to insist they *call* me in the familiar way, by my first name."

I stared at him. Then I glanced at Laitel. Laitel took no notice. He must, I thought, have heard this speech, or a similar speech, before. How had he responded? He hadn't. Of course he hadn't. The concept of an all-seeing, motivating, pitiless God was bad enough. But this affrontery – there could be no reply.

I picked up and drank the pequa, then held out my glass, and Laitel came back and filled it up.

Lohno Tezmaine sat smiling, smiling, like the smiles left, Cheshire-cat-like, behind on the stone temple faces below.

No reply fitting. So what to say? All my adult life, and perhaps earlier, searching doggedly for the punchline, the summing-up, quick, quirky and clean. Award-winning phrases that had never earned a mention. Too glib, or too good. Whatever. Whatever is it with me? For ever shut out, or left behind. Too late or early. Or merely redundant.

"So I'm your invention, Mr Tezmaine – oh, excuse me, Lohno. And Laitel, too?"

"All of it, Frances, actually. Here, there. City, jungle, home. Everything."

"Then you're God."

"Naturally not. Or, that is to say, only on paper."

I drank down the pequa. It tasted foul.

"Prove it," I said. "Go on."

"That would be too easy, Frances."

"Ah yes. Obviously. Oh then, you mustn't, must you."

He turned and squinted up at me. He had had, or still had, excellent eyesight, assisted by all the right contemporary medication. But now his eyes, though glittering and malign as knife-points, were slightly unfocused. He swung back over the table, took up a pen, and wrote swiftly. He handed me the paper.

I read, "Frances looked back, and saw, there in the doorway of the cell, Laitel's white tiger."

My hair stood on end. That hadn't happened in a long while. I dropped the paper on the table.

"Turn round," he said to me, Lohno Tezmaine.

"There's nothing there," I said. I looked at Laitel. "There isn't, Laitel. Or if there is, it's some illusion – hypnotism, some drug – mhash in the oil lamp, maybe. We're suggestible. Everyone is, given the proper scenario."

Laitel nodded. He smiled.

So I turned. Nothing was there. The doorway was empty. Then –

Something pale, that flicked, once, twice, tail-like, lashing, where the lamplight hit the stone of the corridor. A trick of the eyes.

"I didn't see it."

"That's true." Tezmaine leant forward and crossed out the last line he had written. "Sometimes the author makes a mistake. He pushes a subject to do something that doesn't fit, a thing either not in character, or too *intransigently* in character. Characters seldom act in character. This is the measure of a human thing, whether real or invented. A true writer will generally realize his balls-up in time. Not always. One shouldn't ever contrive. The flow of the narrative, the being of the characters themselves, they must be allowed to live their lives, and from that the plot springs, all its events and scenes. Also the landscapes, figurative and mental, in a correct book. You see, the writer need do nothing, or very little, merely observe and listen, and then factually report."

"A journalist? But that's my job, Mr Tezmaine."

"Lohno. Yes, you're right."

He raised the amended paper and read out to me, "But when Frances, turned to face the animal in the doorway, she was only in time to glimpse the last inconclusive flick, flick of its slowly-lashing tail." He laid the paper down. "More pequa, Laitel, please. Have some yourself. It's liberating to be out of the book now. I was getting weary, so I killed myself off, and moved into the third person, only writing about you, Frances, and about Laitel. The rest of your two lives, which I shall contrast and compare, piquantly, I hope, as we go along. No, I can't predict your lives – or very little. You'll live them, and then I shall find out. The time-scales are different, evidently, but you won't be aware of it."

"But we're *amateurs*," I said. My voice was full of rage and bitterness. It surprised me. As if I believed him and resented him as, naturally I'd have to, if it were a fact. But then, I was playing a part, playing a game. Acting.

"Yes," he said, "but *amateur* means 'lover', doesn't it. You have a *love* of life, you *amateurs*, that we professionals have to give up, when once we begin to do it, not for love, but money."

I felt a wave of tiredness sweep through me. "I'm tired," I said. "And I still need to get to the coast. Is Laitel going to drive me there?"

"I don't think so. I think he means to go back into the forests. Do you, Laitel?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Frances."

"Wonderful. So what now?"

"There's an old road that goes straight to the coast," said Lohno, off-hand. "You'll find it and take it in the morning. That much is arranged. It's what you're good at."

"Planning to kill me off? What's it to be, maestro, a gurricula? Snake-bite? Heat exhaustion."

"Oh, no, Frances. We've only just had my death. Too many are bad form, since this isn't a crime novel. You'll find the trek not too bad. A few hours walking, in the shade. You may see some animals, they'll ignore you. And of course, Laitel will give you a lunch-box."

I started laughing. Tezmaine threw back his old snake's head and laughed too. Only Laitel stood in the shadow in his white clothes, silent, demure as a bridesmaid.

In the doorway, I glanced back. "Tezmaine."

"Lohno, please."

"Lohno, Lohno. Am I pregnant?"

"Are you? How interesting. By Laitel, you mean? Despite non-ejaculation, some potent drip. It could be. Yes, I think you might be. Yes. What an inspiration. A child of such mixed blood, so rare. I'll enjoy this. Yes, Frances, yes, you are. *Thank* you. A girl? Almost... almost definitely a girl."

I walked out and went along to the end of the cloister, where the ruin had come apart. Under a leaning statue, with a smile and hands, I curled up to sleep. Presumably I wouldn't topple over the edge. Unless he decided to write me out, after all.

The stars were so bright, so scattered and patterned, numerous, planned. I've never lost my amazement at things like the stars. The pequa said to me, Nothing matters. A mad old man, Laitel in his white clothes he left behind, never packed, what I'd have to do tomorrow, walking through jungle-forest, the lunga-rook. If I did have to. My race and Laitel's, we don't, can't interbreed. Though the precautions I'd taken not to menstruate during this assignment would anyway make conception unlikely. Yet, something, some tremor, like the movement of the second hand on an antique watch. Crazy.

Once in the dark I woke. There was no reason. Nothing stirred. Only the rumble of the Water-Mama, constant as time, but a delusion because, in the end, the cliff would wear away, the waterfall decrease and become only the river.

Next morning, no one was there. Laitel wasn't, nor the old man, or his ghost, no one. The monkeys had vanished back into the jungle-forest to feed or fight or slumber. The pitted statues had lost their mystery with the light. I found some food and a bottle of water lying beside me.

I knew how to find the road. That was from his books, it must have been. It was an old processional way, used to link long-lost villages, or some ancient city of the jungle, to the temple. Curiously it wasn't very overgrown. Perhaps more modern villages kept it clear out of respect or superstition. I met with no one. I saw lemasets, and once a boar digging at the roadside with his tusks. They paid no attention.

I admit it was cooler in the shade, and the water bottle, although I economized with it, lasted me until the forest began to break up and move away from me. Then came bridges over swamp, some of stone, some swaying horizontal ladders of rope and liana. Because this was

some sort of game, or because I'd temporarily gone mad, I felt it would indeed turn out as Lohno Tezmaine had told me, and it did. Beyond the swamp and the scrub was rocky land that went up and over and finally, in the afternoon, ran down to a pocket of glistening, greasy sea.

The shore was covered by people, humans of all races, like something Biblical, I thought, gathered tribes, the end of the world. I stood staring at them, realizing they were there, while the sweat and the water of the air washed down into my eyes. But the transports were there too, the VTO's, and every so often a swarm of them would lift off, or another swarm of them would come in over the bay, putting down on the plasto-steel strips laid out over the water.

Before I even started to climb down, a party of soldiers found me. They were foreigners, but biologically nearer to me than the people of the jungle or the coast. When

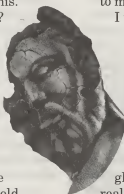
I tried to answer them though, I found I couldn't, the chip in my arm had malfunctioned. We communicated therefore in sign language, but they were cheerful, braced by their issue of performance-enhancing battle drugs. One of them kissed me on the cheek, another fondled my breast. Nothing worse. And so months after I knew that the child, for there was to be one – a boy, did Lohno change his plotline? – was Laitel's, none other's. But at that moment I might gladly have let these men do anything. They were real, they were reality. All they did was get me down to one end of the beach, then push me through the churning mass of flesh, and heave me up into a VTO, among the crying, serious, or jabbering women of their race, mine, others; among the babies and small domestic animals, and the sad or loud men, already playing cards or tuk, as if for the stake of this place, or, their own best chance of existence.

Once we were on our way, a big dark soldier emerged, and sat beside me. We spoke each other's language, the now-useless chip unneeded. I was more glad of his company than I could say. He put his arm around me. We stank of sweat, both of us, and of the wet greenness of the geography we were leaving. But at World's Edge, whoever gives a damn about such things? We didn't make love, have sex. I think it was once called heavy petting, what we did, millions of lifetimes ago, or last year. Plenty of others were doing the same.

Under us, the heavy bounding drone of the VTO, solid as granite up in that space beyond all else.

My soldier left me once only during the journey, and returned with a bottle of whisky. "Drink this," he said, "take a good big drink. Cure all your blues."

Tanith Lee's previous stories in *Interzone* were "The Girl Who Lost Her Looks" (issue 128), "Yellow and Red" (issue 132) and "Jedella Ghost" (issue 135). A prolific author for more than 25 years now, she also continues to write new novels, such as the children's fantasy *Law of the Wolf Tower* (Hodder, 1998) and the American-published dark fantasy *Faces Under Water* (Overlook Press, 1998).



AVANT PULP

Jeff Noon's gorgeous girlfriend has her hands on the wheel and a crazy glint in her big blue eyes. Jeff and Julie are my not entirely reliable guides on the Vurt Tour, a late-night ride scorching the tarmac of the scary bits of Manchester, following the path and pace of Noon's Stashriders of Vurtchester. I make some feeble noises about speed limits. "Ya great mimsy ponce," calls out the great science-fiction writer, Guest of Honour at the 1999 Eastercon, as white of knuckle and green of cheek I cling to my safety belt.

The car grinds to a halt in an enormous pothole in Hulme, a district of dismal skyscrapers about as inner-city as you can get, the model for Vurt's Bottletown. There are no lights in the streets, entirely deserted apart from two shady characters lurking on the pavement, up to no good, some kind of deal going on. I lock the doors. Then Julie's foot is flat on the floor again and we're careering at full g-force down the Rusholme curry corridor.

The car screeches to a merciful if sudden halt. Noon selects a garish neon-lit Indian restaurant, and we take our seats. Among the fragrant spices of dansak and balti, he is animated on the state of the art, on the writing techniques he has filched from dub music and contemporary painting, and damming of elves and spaceships, for him a blight on science fiction. In his view the genre has forgotten its finest moments in inner space and is fossilized in conservative narrative forms that went out with the ark.

Noon first sprung on an unsuspecting reading public in 1993 with *Vurt*, a brilliant debut which the *New Statesman* with uncharacteristic lyricism described as "too beautiful for bikers, too harsh for hippies." Just right for everyone else though, it won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1994. Other accolades include 1995 John W. Campbell Award for best new science-fiction writer; and nomination for a second Clarke Award with



Jeff Noon
interviewed by
Polly Marshall

Nymphomation in 1997.

Born in 1957, Noon is a barely-reformed punk with all the mischievous cynicism that comes with the territory. He's also an erudite lover of the artistic avant garde. His is hip nihilism with rhythm – Beat with beat, a mix that's won him star cyberpunk status in the States. *Vurt*, *Pollen*, *Automated Alice*, *Nymphomation* and *Pixel Juice* – all his works are page-

turning cliff-hanging adventure stories told in sleek poetic style with a rampant and fecund imagination.

Frequent allusions to music also embellish Noon's work and give it pace and pulse. This science fiction uses the technology of techno and the riffs of Hendrix as its stepping off point. Pop lyricism and Noon's soulful emotional bravura puts him in a different class from the habitual tech-

nofetishism of the cyberpunks. Yet his number-one fan is William Gibson.

As the dishes heap up on the table, Noon talks of his Vurt series. "The pure Vurt sequence – in chronological order – is *Nymphomation*, *Vurt*, *Pollen* and one other, which will come eventually. *Automated Alice* fits into that; and some stories from *Pixel Juice* tangentially. The last book will be the proper last book. It won't be like the others. I'm not going to do it till I think there'll be an audience for it. I'm writing these books and putting them out, and I get the impression they're being lost to the general public because they're being classed as science fiction."

Hang on a minute. This is the man who took sf's top prize with his first book. He is guest of honour at Eastercon this year and he's dissing the genre? "Yeah. I think it turns a lot of people off. It's unfortunate. It happens. I'm one of those writers – and there's an increasing number of us in Britain – who are on the edges of the science fiction. And it would do us more good to get our books onto the general-fiction tables."

I'm stunned. Noon is known as the Philip K. Dick of the '90s. He's in great company, rated alongside classic speculative fiction writers like J. G. Ballard. How can he say such things? "I'm in great company. But Ballard has managed that transition into general fiction. When the public goes into a book shop, the only people that venture into the science-fiction section are hardcore fans and usually it's on the third floor at the back."

And then there's the challenge of book jackets with elves and fairies... "Exactly, exactly. Even Philip Dick's work has flying saucers all over the jackets."

"I know for a fact that my main audience doesn't come just from the science-fiction community, but from a vast amount of rock'n'roll kids. To a large extent I'm writing for and with them. Being put in science fiction, I'm losing out on kids who will walk into the bookshop, see a book and think 'That looks okay.' The science-fiction writers in Britain, and there's a number of us who are all on the edge, have to make a decision before it's too late."

"It's an extremely laddish genre which doesn't appeal to me at all. My work sets itself up against that. If I had my way, I would define science fiction very precisely as being about two things: it's either about spaceships or it's about elves. And in the sf section of a book shop, I would put just those books. Now everything else, including Ballard, Dick, me, Michael Marshall Smith, Paul J. McAuley and Pat Cadigan, I'd move into general fiction."

But we're talking about a noble tra-

This science fiction used the technology of techno and the riffs of Hendrix

dition started by Mary Shelley which questions the progress of technology, genre literature that suggests new ethics and values... "Of course. But the problem is the real ambiguity in science fiction. When you open a science-fiction book, it's about change isn't it? And opening that book is accepting that change. This is going to be different than the world I live in. I'm going to maybe learn something from that element of change." Which is great. And you can't beat science fiction for that. It is the most

transformative genre.

"Unfortunately at the same time as that worship of change, you've also got this really strong streak of conservatism in science fiction, which just goes all the way through it. I'm trying to work my way out of that conservative element, so I'm just concerned with the element of change."

What form does this dreaded conservatism take? "On a very basic level: some people go off in space on a spaceship. And what happens on that spaceship, for all intents and purposes, it might as well be happening in some little village in England. For the amount of truth it has about contemporary Britain, or contemporary feelings, or contemporary emotions. So why it's in a spaceship, I don't know, except the writer gets off on this fact and the readers do, so it becomes a pure excitement thing."

"It's not a question of wanting to get away from science fiction. It just so happens that if you write anything weird – and I love writing weird stuff – you get classed as science fiction. What I'm trying to suggest is that science fiction has got very very conservative. And that's against the basic idea of the genre."

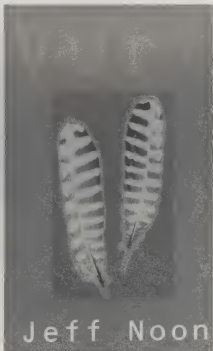
"It's narrative conservatism. I was talking to an sf writer at a convention and I said I was writing this book in the present tense. The writer couldn't believe that I was writing in the present tense. 'Cos when you tell a story, quite naturally, you start to write in the past tense. If you write about the future in the present tense, it's much more immediate. The words tend to leap off the page at the reader. It's a powerful tool to use."

Feminist science fiction is bending the rules, surely? "Women's science-fiction writers are so concerned with gender issues that it becomes an issue-based fiction anyway. Which is fine. Male science fiction, you might as well forget it, mate. You get a lot of these incredible descriptions of female bodies, but for some reason they never describe the male body."

Noon makes science fiction sound as hackneyed as cowboy stories or noir gumshoe tales set in San Francisco. Has sf had its day? "No. What we've got to do is keep moving in science fiction. And we have to glorify the fact that it is this transformative fiction. To be honest, there have been too many novels written about space travel and elves."

Maybe Tolkien is to blame. According to legend, as he read a day's production of *Lord of the Rings* to C. S. Lewis and his circle in their Oxford local, Lewis was heard to mutter into his mild-and-bitter "Not another fucking elf." A view with which Noon would seem to concur.

Philip Dick tried a genre-crossover



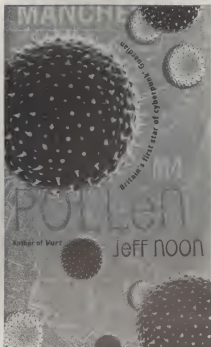
into what he felt was more serious literary endeavour with "straight" novels like *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* and *Mary and the Giant*. Is Jeff Noon trying to do the same thing? "No, not at all. I'm not going to go straight. If I want to go straight I'll do it because the subject demands it."

"My next book is a fictional history of Manchester music. It's going to be my straightest book, obviously. Because the subject demands it. That's one of my key things. The subject demands the form of the book. I'm never going to lose the weird element in my work. Sometimes, the weirdness is going to be ultimate, but other times it's going to be a little thread running through the story, quite a subtle thing. And I want to have the openness to move, to play with that."

Wordplay informs Noon's work with a shimmer of poetic puns that seem to have wandered off the pages of James Joyce, softening the blows of his sometimes harsh narrative. The attention to detail in language is thorough. Noon acknowledges the influence on his writing of Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. "His poem 'Pied Beauty' – 'Glory be to God for dappled things' – was my introduction to wordplay."

"I try to make a book work on every level, which means from the word level, sentence level, paragraph level, chapter level to book level. I put a lot of effort into making it work on all different levels."

Unlike Noon's colleagues in science fiction, who are not getting off lightly. "In a lot of science-fiction books, writers are working at the chapter level. You can do that, and there's nothing wrong with it. You write chapter one



and then you write chapter two till you've got about twelve chapters and then it's a book, and then you put it out. But if you delve down a bit deeper and start working at the paragraph level, it gets more interesting. If you say 'Right, this paragraph, what's it about? What's the reader got from this paragraph? What's the reader got from this sentence? From this word?' In traditional science fiction there's not a lot of that kind of writing goes on. Because the spaceships travel from chapter to chapter, basically, not from line to line."

It is difficult to pin Noon down. Is he seeking a specific effect with which to manipulate his readers? "Not necessarily. I'm not quite sure what the effect is going to be. What I'm trying to do is quite specific – excite them. Two things are going on when I write. One is that I'm trying to give the reader a bloody good time. And the other thing is that I'm trying to be brilliant."

"The very act of trying to be brilliant forces you to work hard, and to start working on this word and line level. It takes a lot of time, though. It's using poetry to tell an action story. That's avant pulp."

What is that when it's at home? "There are two ultimate avant-pulp novels. One would be if James Joyce wrote *Farewell My Lovely*. And the other one would be if Raymond Chandler wrote *Ulysses*. Now I'm not quite sure which of them would be the best avant pulp. But they could fight it out, those two. That's what the avant pulpist aims towards, one of those expressions."

Um, yes. I wonder if he has conversations with these people in his mind

about this? "No, it's just a fantasy of mine, the avant pulp. I do take it very seriously, though. I'm a fantastic lover of 20th-century art. I've always absolutely adored it, the more difficult the better as far as I'm concerned. At the turn of the century, the thing split off – you get the sudden invention of populist art, and the invention of the avant garde. If you go back to, say, Dickens, he was an avant-garde popular writer. There weren't many books published that you could class as avant-garde in those days. They tended to take the popular form and work with it, explore things within it. At the start of the 20th century it split into two. If you look at each artform you can actually see the moment of split."

"In jazz, it's very specific. Charlie Parker. He was the split. Up till then, jazz was a popular form. As far as I'm concerned, Duke Ellington is the highest popular artform there is. With Charlie Parker it split, and you've got this offshoot that said 'Ah, jazz! It's an avant-garde artform. Charlie Parker, come on!' They all donned their berets and got down on it. At the same time, all the other jazz fans were thinking 'Oh we don't like Charlie Parker, it's not music!' So they formed the trad jazz movement. Which went back to New Orleans. 'This is real jazz. Guys in waistcoats playing solos all at the same time.' So you got this sudden split."

"If you look at writing the same thing has happened. Because of the split you get expert writers in each field. So you get brilliant avant gardists and you get brilliant popular writers. What you don't get too much is people that are interested in com-



JEFF NOON
AUTHOR OF VURT AND POLLEN
AUTOMATED
ALICE

"DESTINED FOR CUE! STATUS...
CYBERPUNK AT THE CUTTING EDGE."
Maxim

binning the two. There are some. For instance Martin Amis is somebody who tries to write a very popular book in a more experimental manner. He's telling a very sleazy story, with Martin it's as sleazy as possible. But he'll be doing it in a poetic manner.

"That's the basic tenet of avant pulp. To be as true to the story as you can and at the same time, to be as experimental as you can. Avant pulp has a love of narrative. Yeah! Real round-the-camp-fire storytelling techniques."

This brings us to a paradox. Back to the old stories – cowboys, gumshoes, spaceships – simple adventure tales, have their place, then? "Yeah, all that. I love all that. Why can't you write that kind of story keeping the audience excited at that kind of level, using some of the other techniques that the avant-garde art-forms have invented?"

"Just from the stuff I've done up to now there are certain rules I know. For instance, when you write a passage in an avant-pulp book, you make a decision, is this passage going to be narrative or experiment? The key idea is to keep the reader reading. I'm not interested in writing books for a few people that get off on it, that's not me at all, because I believe so much that reading's great. It's trying to keep them hooked to the story.

"But when you're experimental with it, if you loose it they'll just close the book, won't they? Unless they're really dedicated. So it's dangerous. Every moment of the creative process, you have to be aware of the different struggles going on between the avant and the pulp and work with them, see which one's going to win at which moment. In the most avant-garde bits of my novels, it breaks down because society's breaking down or my character is breaking down so I'm doing quite an obvious thing."

Talking of societal breakdown, it is true that nobody writes a shopping centre quite like Noon does. Not even Ballard's urban environments can compete. "If people are going shopping," says Noon, "I want the words to go shopping. If they're in a car chase, I want the words to chase.

"It sounds very simple, it's very difficult to do. It's something you get better at the more you do it. It comes from painting. Painting's all about the relationship between form and content. And that's what this is."

This is interesting. Ballard is also a collector of surrealist art. I put this to Noon. "He's the exact opposite of me. It doesn't matter what he's writing about, it's always as though it's some massive distance away. He describes it in a very cool manner. Even if someone's getting shot, it's the same as if they're going shopping."

"I would define science fiction very precisely as being about two things: it's either about spaceships or it's about elves."

So Ballard is dissecting inner space? "With a very sharp scalpel. I'm attacking it with a very blunt paintbrush, throwing words at the wall. Oh yeah! That one's stuck to the page, that'll do."

With Noon's poetic form, counter-cultural empathies and iconoclasm, his pop references – is he mythologizing, trying to create new fables for our times? Or maybe bring back the old ones. He refers to the Celtic fertility god John Barleycorn in *Pollen*. How did this come about? "I first heard the song 'Barleycorn' from Traffic and I was absolutely knocked over by it. That's such a weird song. And it constantly

reminds me of how much we've lost in Britain by throwing that kind of stuff away, by becoming so cynical. We've lost that poetry. If you listen to folk songs, I think they're incredible poetry. People call me cyberpunk and all that when I'm also really into folk music. It's very strange. Some people can't take it. The young people, the kids that think that I am this street kind of person. They think I'm on drugs all the time. They think I've got dreadlocks and stuff like that. I turn up and they just think 'Who's this normal guy?' Yes, I'm normal, you know. I make it all up. But I'm very interested in trying to create a kind of mythology for Britain, a new mythology. Very into that."

Wait just a minute, man of contradictions. Don't go all organic on me. What about the cyberpunk reputation? The Vurt series explores and exploits computer technology. "It is technological in the sense that what they're doing with computers at the moment is actually building in these evolutionary systems where different kinds of knowledge fight it out with each other inside the computer. Complexity theory, it's called. Nanotechnology and all. They are building evolutionary computers. I am very aware of that kind of stuff. But I'm not going to push it at people. I'm just gonna say it's not the binary system, it's the beany system.

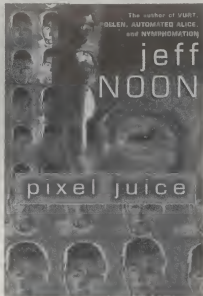
"I can't do that hard-edged science fiction at all, I just can't do it. For instance, so many science-fiction books take whole pages explaining how some beam works. I don't want to do that. I *could* do that; because I have got a knowledge of science and mathematics. But I don't do it. I take things that I've learnt and just turn them into fantasy, *no nobody* knows. It's like Vurt. What is Vurt? I dunno. Although I've pledged myself to write four books about Vurt."

The Vurt system intrigues and mystifies its author as much as the reader. "I'm constantly searching for this mysterious Miss Hobart who keeps turning up." Who is she? Does he know yet?

"No! I haven't a clue."

Was his latest offering, *Pixel Juice*, a departure for Noon, as a collection of short stories and pieces? "I began this massive fictional history which just started to grow. Other writers collect some old stories and bung them out. I can't do that. I took a few stories and messed about. Instead of telling a story with a novel, I'd tell it with short stories. It wasn't an easy thing to do compared to a novel."

Did Noon find himself mixing the stories as a DJ mixes tunes into each other? "I tried that effect in *Pixel Juice*. All the stories kind of bled at the edges. Some things in the book mix stories together. I don't think



that experiment's the best part of the book. I'm up for messing about with things and seeing what works and what doesn't. There's other stuff in there like dub stories, remix stories.

"I take the five great techniques of dance music – remixing, dub, scratching, sampling and segueing. I'm trying to find literary equivalents, using techniques other artforms have invented. Pushing them into different media. It's the most exciting thing I can do with language. The way I use language it just so happens that the techniques of dance music coincide with this dub thing I'm interested in anyway. I wouldn't have come up with the idea unless I was into modern dance music. I don't think William Burroughs would've come up with the cut-up technique unless he was into avant-garde music." Or scissors. "Or drugs," says Noon, laughing. "Certain art techniques enter into the public consciousness. The dub and the remix has."

How does dub translate into literary effort? "You take a story and use the best bits. And mess about till it makes some other kind of sense. That's the easy way. The difficult bit is what I do in that secret process. It actually goes through a hell of a lot of work. You'd be surprised for the end result just how much work I put in getting it distilled and purified down."

So is Noon the Lee Scratch Perry of contemporary letters? "I'd love to think that," he laughs.

Are computer techniques and technology Noon's cauldron? "I use some computer techniques, but most of it is in my head. Next year I will release a book that is the treasure trove of all this, *The Dark Cavern*, which will bring to light exactly the techniques. There are about 20 of them, all hidden in my work. It's a mad weird experimental book. It's not meant for a general audience, but for a few fans – for the specialist market."

On being pumped for more info, Noon turns coy. "I can't say more than that at the moment. It's a secret project. I've already said too much." Ooh. If I buy him another Kaliber, will he tell me some more? "Nope."

And for the future? Noon's next book is *Needle to the Groove*, due out in October 1999. "I've been working up to it for a long time – both technologically and emotionally. It's a fictional history trip about Manchester music."

He's also working on three more experimental texts – "They will drive you wild!" he swears. "These are like my solo albums where I go off and get all conceptual." Called *Metamorphifications*, he has "three of them in the mind, one dub, the second is forming in my brain and the third I don't know anything about yet. Then I'm

free, I don't have to write about Manchester any more. Then I'm going to take a year off and do playwriting and screenwriting."

Noon has adapted *Vurt* for the stage and it was to have had its world premier in May 1999 in Leipzig – translated into German. Contact Theatre commissioned the dramatization last year, but a fire in the theatre has meant that their *Vurt* will not be staged until early 2000. Says Noon, "It's easier to put on more way-out stuff in Europe. It's quite an experimental narrative. The language is very highly charged." Continental theatre at least has acknowledged the poetry in Noon's writing.

But tell all, Noon. Who are his literary heroes? Is Dick top of the list? "Strange thing about Philip Dick is everybody says 'Oh, you're very influenced by him.' I've always said no, 'cos till '96, I'd never read anything by him. Then I read my first Dick novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

I was amazed by how close it is. It was spooky, you know, quite frightening actually. But I looked at Dick because people kept saying 'You're so alike.'"

There's great fantasy in Noon's work. Does he agree that his work has the magic power of children's books? "Yeah, my books are almost children's books. If you took out all the weird sex and all that you'd actually be left with great children's books, *Pollen* especially, it's just a wild fantasy. It's very innocent."

Our curries finished, and the dishes cleared away, it is back to the car and the danger ride round Manchester. Back to my hotel via the *Coronation Street* set and theme park. Deeply surreal, I am in the *Vurt*. My unreliable guides drop me off. It's "part of the theme ride of the trip."

Like Noon's fiction, the ride is high, fast and one from which I – and squillions of other readers – may never come down. [Z]

Words from Jeff Noon

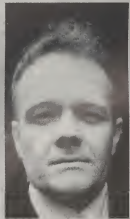
Avant Pulp is a method of composition, exploring the relationship between narrative and experimentation. All art works are composed of two elements: form and content. In a novel, the form is the style, and the content the story. If we take these two elements and consider them in terms of narrative and experiment, we see that four possibilities emerge.

- 1) The form and the content can both be concerned purely with narrative. This is the straight story, told in a realistic manner. The works of Anita Brookner provide an example.
- 2) The form and the content can both be concerned with experimentation. This produces the so-called "unreadable" text. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is the prime example of this.
- 3) The story is straight narrative, but told in an experimental manner. James Elroy's *White Jazz* for instance.
- 4) The story itself is the experiment, but told in a straight manner. Consider Borges's "The Library of Babel."

Now, the avant-pulp novel will use the first two techniques at times; ie sometimes it will tell the story straight, and at others it will simply go mad. But mainly it will concern itself with the last two relationships. In my work, I think I'm struggling all the time to work these various combinations, strands if you like, into a book that people will actually want to experience. The advantage of the last two relationships is that, while the book may well be reaching for crazy heights, there will always be some grounding force to it, whether in the story or the style, that will keep the reader turning the pages.

That's the theory anyway. And I suspect that the Science-Fictional novel is uniquely placed to explore this ambiguity.

I do think about these things, in between the writing. Of course, when I'm working at the computer, it all becomes secondary to actually trying to get the next sentence finished.



ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

I'm busy with hordes of on-line book reviews these days (to the point where Mike Ashley's *Mammoth Book of Fantasy* blurs in my mind with Steve Baxter's *Fantasy Book of Mammoths*), but begin to hear the terrible siren song of Windows programming as the mild success of my *SF Encyclopedia* CD-ROM viewer software lures me to believe (see HUBRIS) that we might just be able to produce the *Fantasy Encyclopedia* CD-ROM right here in the barn, using my own hardware... You read it here first.

AMONG THE HAIRY EARTHMEN

Michael Crichton unveiled an all-purpose argument against anyone loathsome enough to grumble about dodgy or misleading science in his work: "In a story like *Jurassic Park*, to complain of inaccuracy is downright weird. Nobody can make a dinosaur. Therefore the story is a fantasy. How can accuracy have any meaning in a fantasy?" Ho hum.

Jane Johnson, talking about her latest "Gabriel King" collaboration in what she fondly believed to be the privacy of the *Bucks Free Press*, confessed she'd rather keep the day job as a HarperCollins editor than write full-time: "Most authors that I have witnessed have been slightly mad. I am not sure that working from home all the time is good for people, and I think I would probably get quite neurotic." Several British sf authors, when invited to comment, put pencils up their noses and said "Wibble wibble."

Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) died on 11 January aged 101. Her 100-odd books – produced over a span of nearly 80 years – included several fantasies and three sf novels, of which *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*

(1962) is a classic of alien communication. Newspaper obituaries were numerous, but tended to pass over her genre contributions. She so very nearly became the first sf author to live in three centuries.

Brian Moore (1921-1999), "mainstream" author of some supernatural fiction and borderline fantasies like *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975), also died in January.

Norman Spinrad announced his candidacy as SFWA president, owing to what he calls the "extraordinarily malodorous situation" whereby, in the wake of Robert Sawyer's resignation, he reckons that almost half the SFWA board of directors have now been appointed by fiat rather than elected.

J. Michael Straczynski of *Babylon 5* fame grumbled on the net that many cast members who appeared as guests at VorCon in Los Angeles (run by JMS's *bête noire*, British organizer Brian Cooney) were "stiffed for the bulk of their fees."

Ron Turner (1922-1998), who died late last year, remains one of the most collected of British comic artists. His work, though mostly anonymous, is ranked by aficionados with Frank Hampson's Dan Dare and Syd Jordan's Jeff Hawke. Turner's productions included early-50s Vargo Statten paperback covers and popular comic strips like *The Daleks* (1966-7); he was still painting covers for Gryphon Books in 1998.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Paths of Glory. Clarke Award shortlist for 1998 UK-published sf: John Barnes, *Earth Made of Glass*; Peter Delacorte, *Time on My Hands*; Ken MacLeod, *The Cassini Division*; Christopher Priest, *The Extremes*; Alison Sinclair, *Cavalcade*; Tricia Sullivan, *Dreaming in Smoke*. Winner announced May... *The J. Lloyd Eaton Award*, presented since 1979 for sf critical works, went to *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* ed. John Clute & John Grant... *Sapphire Awards* (sf romance) were voted to: 1st place, Patricia White, *A Wizard Scorned*; 2nd, Jennifer Dunne, *Raven's Heart*; 3rd, Laurel K. Hamilton, *Blue Moon*. The dwindling print market for this subgenre led to the first two being published only on-line, a state of affairs finessed by award co-ordinator Patricia Bray as: "1998 will be remembered as the year that electronic books came of age..." *Philip K. Dick Award* shortlist for 1998 US paperback originals: Geoff Ryman, *253: The Print Remix*; Paul Di Filippo, *Lost Pages*; Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*; Steve Aylett, *Slaughtermatic*; Paul J. McAuley, *The Invisible Country*.

Subliminal Smut! In a fit of nervous prudery, Disney withdrew 3.4 million new videos of the animated movie *The Rescuers* (1977). A whole two frames naughtily show – in a window glimpsed briefly in the background – a naked lady's torso, lifted from *Playboy*. This was removed from the cinema version, but by the time of the digitally remastered video everyone had forgotten. Rumour names the culprit as animator Don Bluth, who after *The Rescuers* left in some disaffection (with several other Disney animation staff) to start his own company.

Thog's Physics Masterclass. Sighted (briefly) as Today's Space Fact at the NASA Human Spaceflight web site: "How can the space shuttle move when the astronauts are sleeping? One of Newton's laws of physics states that an object set in motion will remain in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. Since no such (gravity) force exists in space, the object (in this case the shuttle) falls around the Earth continually. The shuttle is affected slightly by the gravity of Earth, which allows it to fall around." *Noises Off*: far away, Newton is heard continually falling around in his coffin.

Small Press. *Light's List 1999*, now in its 14th year, tersely lists 1,375+ small-press magazines. A5, 58p; £1.50 to John Light, 37 The Meadows, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland, TD15 1NY.

Thog's Masterclass. "At least it proves he's vulnerable to our energies!" Morton smiled grimly. 'Because he rendered them harmless.' (A. E. van Vogt, "Black Destroyer," 1939)... "Sarah sat opposite the noisy young people with a huge wholemeal sandwich filled with slices of fresh ham and a half pint of Guinness." (Graham Masterton, "Fairy Story," 1996)... "Sherlock Holmes leafed through the papers with one hand, as with the other he continued to crunch toast and marmalade." (Colin Bruce, *The Strange Case Of Mrs Hudson's Cat*, 1997)... "One sight-seer shakes his head like a collecting box for a good cause." "... "She drifted away from me, her dress clinging to her like a drowned man." (both Jeanette Winterson, *The World and Other Places*, 1998)... "A muscle fired in her throat and her pupils got big and floaty." "... "His eyes were like bottles with something moving at the bottom." (both Windsor Churlton, *Cold Fusion*, 1999)... *Dept of Raunchy Thrillers*: "The rubber left little to the imagination, and Barazo's face showed its pleasure at the libidinous fission triggered by his woman's colliding nuclei." "... "The Gulf Stream was rocking the boat in the cleavage of its D-cup bosomy swells." (both Christopher Buckley, *Wet Work*, 1991)

ALLEN

Paul J. McAuley

Before Alan Smith could get into the convention, he had to endure a few minutes of low farce at the registration desk. Although Howard had promised to arrange a day membership, the woman behind the desk, wearing an ExoCon 8 T-shirt, with a soft toy of an alien fastened to her shoulder like a pirate's parrot, couldn't locate Alan's badge. She called over a colleague and they rifled through a printout and searched the boxes under the desk with an increasingly harried air. At last, the woman found him listed as "Friend of Howard Hutton," mis-spelled his name in purple Magic Marker on a blank badge, told him to wear it at all times, and, before he could protest, pushed the pin through the lapel of his brand new merino wool Cerruti jacket.

So Alan was feeling more than slightly pissed-off as he went around the desk and display boards which blocked the top of the broad flight of stairs, but then he saw the sports bar-sized screen at the far end of the big lounge and it was as if eleven years had dropped away. The screen was tuned to alien TV, of course. Not the compilation channel that played on cable, which flipped from one programme to the next every 30 seconds, but the real thing.

It was one of the panoramic views, looking out over a valley wooded with parasol trees towards low, eroded mountains, the mountains blue against the indigo sky, the crowded caps of the parasol trees (reminding Alan of the umbrellas of shoppers jostling through the city centre in the cold Easter rain) dark violet mottled with glittering cyans and purples. Ruins of a tower stood salt-white in the middle distance; half a dozen aliens were gliding around its jagged top.

Alan had seen the first decoded clips released by NASA when he and Howard had been engineering freshers and best friends at Cambridge, both of them science bugs from primary city comprehensives, intimidated by the gilded arts students and the ancient rituals of the university. Alan, a sci-fi fan, had been more interested than most because here was the wondrous reality that his beloved science-fiction novels, with their gaudy covers,

clumsy prose and stagy melodrama, had only approximated. Aliens living on a desert world half the size of Earth with a moon as big as Mars, twin planets really, only 50 light years away. Aliens simultaneously transmitting a thousand different TV programmes, saying hello to their neighbours. But it had been Howard who had dropped out of engineering to take astronomy and biology instead, Howard who had systematically collected and digested video tapes and NASA press releases and scientific papers and had written articles about the aliens for popular magazines; just before graduation he had published a three-page piece in the colour supplement of one of the Sunday papers.

After university, Alan had joined an international company specializing in mass-transit systems, had married and started a family. His sci-fi collection had been sealed in a carton which moved with him unopened through various postings until it had been lost somewhere between Bangkok and Munich. Meanwhile, Howard had drifted into the freelance journalist scene in London. He had come to Alan's wedding and had once visited Alan in Paris, his first posting, but gradually they had lost touch. Then, a month ago, Alan had found one of Howard's books in an airport bookshop. Howard's e-mail address had been printed at the end of the brief preface, and on a whim Alan had sent him a message. Howard's response mentioned that he was to be a guest at a convention in Liverpool; Alan had a meeting with the city council that same weekend. The coincidence had been irresistible. They had arranged to meet.

Alan had stayed in this hotel two years ago, during a corporate hospitality jaunt to Aintree, and had been amazed by the brazenness with which the city's unofficial hostesses, in their tight, short, white dresses and bleached hair and artificial tans, had mingled with the racegoers in the big lounge which, with its chandeliers and tall gilt mirrors, was a replica of one of the *Titanic's* passenger lounges. But there was no sign of that cheerful rowdiness now, although there were plenty of people sitting on banquettes around tables or in circles on the

carpet. The lights in the big chandeliers were on, even though it was the middle of the afternoon, and the room had the dowdy, exhausted look of a place inhabited 24 hours a day. Alan walked slowly down its length towards the big screen and its strange alien panorama, but saw no sign of Howard. Most of the conference delegates were men, tending towards 40 or older, a sizable percentage with beards and straggly hair, wearing T-shirts or denim jackets and baggy jeans or sweatpants, the uniform of students 20 years ago. They talked animatedly or hunched together over laptops or palmtops; no one was watching the screen. There was a comradely buzz of conversation, a stale smell of beer and cigarettes. The ashtrays were overflowing; the tables were cluttered with empty glasses and bottles. It was like a cross between a computer fair, a science convention and an all-night party.

Howard wasn't in the bar to one side of the lounge either, nor in the "real ale bar" to the rear. Alan felt a mixture of amusement and frustration. It was so like Howard, famously absent-minded and always late for lectures, to have invited him and then to have forgotten all about it. Alan looked at the pocket program he had been given along with his badge. A panel on starship design, another on alien behaviour, a third on possible translations of their glyphs. Howard was giving a talk later in the evening, on the timeline of the aliens' history, but it was after Alan's flight was due to leave. Alan stood in the back of the room where the current program item was being held, someone showing slides and speculating about caste relationships in one of the non-flying species domesticated by the aliens and used as both labourers and a food source, but he couldn't spot Howard amongst the rows of intent people and slipped out.

And there Howard was, coming down the stairs on the far side of the lounge, talking with a heavily made-up woman in a business suit and followed by a man with a professional video camera up on his shoulder. Howard was better dressed than Alan had expected, in suit and tie and polished brogues, his wiry hair short and neat, a bit of a paunch stretching the front of his shirt, but otherwise Howard, the same square white face, the same gold-rimmed spectacles, the same grin when he saw Alan coming towards him as he said goodbye to the TV people.

Alan bought pints in the bar and they caught up. Howard still had the same braying laugh, the same way of adjusting his spectacles by pinching their bridge between thumb and forefinger. Their frames had marked his damp white skin. He still bit his nails, Alan saw, but his fingers were no longer inkstained. Screens banked along one side of the bar were showing various channels of alien TV. Howard kept glancing at them, their light sliding over the lenses of his spectacles. He had brought a paperback copy of one of his books, and signed it with a cramped yet fastidious hand.

"I still remember what you said when the first clips were shown," he told Alan.

"I remember how pissed we all were."

NASA had released the clips at six o'clock Eastern Standard Time, eleven at night in Cambridge, pub closing time. The TV lounge of the college had been crowded

with raucous undergraduates drinking from cans of lager or beer.

Howard said, "We were drinking coffee."

"So we were. God, yes. The only sober people in the room. And that woman, what was her name? The mature postgraduate."

"Eileen O'Neil."

"Right. She said that it was like the first moon landing."

"It was more important than that," Howard said.

"Well, it was a long time ago, anyway. Eleven years. Jesus."

"It's still important," Howard said.

There was an awkward silence. At last, Alan asked about the publishing business, genuinely interested in how Howard managed to scratch a living.

"I get by," Howard said, with an evasiveness that might be mistaken for modesty if you didn't know him better. He had never liked talking about himself; Alan had known him for two years before he realised that his parents were divorced. He still stooped, as if mortified by the presence his height lent him.

"It's amazing," Alan said. "I mean, that you can make money with this."

"It was the biggest thing in a thousand years," Howard said. "The public interest didn't last, but there are still plenty of people all over the world studying the aliens. Your company keeps track, I bet. Most big companies do. And the people here keep track too."

The response was so smooth that Alan wondered if it was the kind of soundbite Howard gave to TV people. He said, "Of course we keep track. We'd be foolish not to."

All the big discoveries had been made years ago, of course, but, like its competitors, his company still monitored the alien TV broadcasts, using AIs to sift out anything potentially interesting. Otherwise, people watched alien TV about as much as they watched, say, QVC. A few watched all day; some watched for a few minutes with the same kind of inert fascination (how long can that guy talk about car wax? Just what is that freak thing doing?); most, like Alan, caught a few seconds while flicking past late at night, in the usual hunt to confirm that, yes, there was nothing worth watching on any of the hundred cable channels.

Howard said, "There's a lot more to it than stealing their technology. Exobiology, behavioral studies, language, history, just to begin with." He ticked them off on his fingers, hunched forward in his chair so that his knees brushed Alan's. Alan pulled his chair back a little, but Howard didn't notice. He said, "The aliens have been civilised for at least a million years. They want us to know all about them, and the amount of information in their broadcasts is phenomenal. Of course, companies like yours look for stuff to steal, and universities have research programmes, but alien TV is like astronomy. Most comets and novas are still spotted by amateurs, and there's plenty of room for amateurs to make valid discoveries by watching alien TV. We pick up the stuff no one else bothers to watch. AIs are programmed to sift data in a limited number of ways, but the human mind is infinitely flexible."

Alan laughed. The same old Howard, earnestly pedantic, hoping to win any argument by sheer weight of words. He said, "You don't have to convert me. I used to watch that stuff as much as you."

"It's still just as much fun," Howard said, glancing at the screens as he leaned forward to pick up his pint. "We could watch a thousand years and still have things to learn."

Alan laughed again. "You sound... evangelical."

"It's what I do," Howard said. "You might think that I don't have a proper job, but this is it. I'm off to the States later this year. They hold a big convention every year, over the Labor Day weekend. Five thousand people from all over the world."

"And do they find anything? Anything important, I mean."

"If you mean commercially important, no. But that's not the point. It's the sense of wonder, like your old science-fiction books. One of the other GOHs here used to be a science-fiction writer, in fact."

"GOH?"

Howard grinned and said, as if confiding a clue to a secret code, "Guest of Honour. It's great for egoboo, but nice to meet your readers, too."

They had another drink, and Howard insisted on showing Alan around the dealer's room. There was a stand for a company selling the satellite dishes and decoders needed to access the alien TV broadcasts relayed from the joint NASA-ESA radio telescope. Trestle tables were loaded with racks of data needles containing thousands of stills or hours of edited video sequences, magazines, self-published theses as thick as bibles, computer programmes for image capture and analysis, models and sculptures of aliens and alien buildings, maps, field guides to the flora and fauna of the alien planet and its moon, exquisitely detailed dioramas of landscapes, even a table of tattered sci-fi paperbacks.

Howard chatted knowledgeably to the dealers, signed copies of his book brought by deferential fans. This was his element – more important than alien TV to these people was the culture they had created around it. He had never really grown up, Alan realized – still the same fascination with trivia, the same selfish irresponsibility. He wanted Alan to stay around for his panel, and said that afterwards the convention committee would take them out for a meal in this great Greek restaurant, but Alan made his excuses. In truth, he felt a touch of claustrophobia, surrounded as he was by the products of tens of thousands of hours squandered on simulated scholarship no one would ever read. The last thing he needed was to be trapped in a taverna with a bunch of obsessives.

"We should keep in touch," Howard said. "I've always said companies like yours could learn a lot from us."

"It's not really my field," Alan said carefully.

"But it touches on everything. You know," Howard said earnestly, "I still remember what you said when we saw the first broadcast, that nothing will ever be the same again. You were right. Alien TV changed us, and it's still changing us."

"I said that?" Alan felt now that he was being

manipulated, that Howard wasn't interested in him because of their old friendship, but because of his connections. He said, knowing how feeble it sounded, "Listen, Howard, it was nice to meet up again, but I really do have to go and get ready for my flight. Don't let me hold you up."

But Howard followed Alan out through the revolving doors into the rain, and was still talking about the importance of his work as Alan got into a taxi. "The beauty of their world," Howard said. "And ethics, and philosophies we can't even dream of. The intangible that stands behind the tangible. By using their technology without understanding them, we're changing ourselves in ways we can't predict!"

He had to shout the last, because Alan had shut the door and the taxi was pulling away.



Alan went back to his own hotel and packed and called his wife, then took the elevated train (a subsidiary of his company ran it) out to the airport. He sat in the bar until his flight was called, chatting with a couple structural engineers whose company also had a share in the construction of the space elevator. The feeling that he had escaped from some suffocating dream slowly left him; after the second drink the whole unfortunate episode began to take on a comic aspect, and before he left he managed to make a couple of jokes about it to his new companions.

Nairobi was only an hour away by scramjet. Alan looked out of the port (every seat was a window seat in business class) and drank a gin-and-tonic and ate chilly peanuts from their vacuum sealed foil while the blue-white curve of the Earth turned below. His wife was there to meet him in the crowds at the airport, and she drove him through the dusty streets out to the compound where they lived. It was evening here, still very hot. The elevator stood against thunderclouds to the north-west, limned by blinking warning lights, vanishing into the bruised sky like a huge version of the Indian Rope Trick. Alan's firm had just won the contract to build and service the huge elevator cars, each as big as a ten-storey office building, that would shuttle between the Earth's surface and the terminal in geostationary orbit.

Later, after he had given his son and daughter their presents and helped the nanny with their bathtime, and picked over an unwanted dinner, Alan sat in his big leather chair in his den, sipping a gin-and-tonic, restlessly flicking through the channels on his screen. And there was the alien TV, one of them facing the camera or whatever they used, gesticulating with half a dozen limbs, including the bright red thing that looked like a long spiny penis, then *flip*, an aerial shot of one of their roosts, hundreds of tall thin spiky towers studded with openings and platforms and ledges that reared up out of scrubby desert with tens of thousands of aliens swooping and gliding at all levels, *flip*, a view across the rolling green grassland of the alien's

big moon, with the alien's planet a blue-white chip stuck in the dark sky, *flip*, aliens clustered around some huge half-dismantled machine under a tented roof of gauzy material, *flip*, hundreds of ape-like creatures working in a flooded field, *flip*, a wide canal running across a red desert, *flip, flip, flip...*

What did it matter exactly how old their civilization was; whether or not they were on their way here to eat us or conquer us or sell us the squidgy things they sometimes rubbed over their bodies; whether the formal battles they fought, hand-to-hand aerial combat above the vast natural amphitheatre of a shield volcano, were over religion or whether use of red- or blue-banded squidgy things was more correct? They were aliens. What they did was inexplicable. Only the few broadcasts which utilized the universal language of physics and mathematics were comprehensible, and only what human minds and hands did with the knowledge gleaned from those broadcasts was important. The space elevator, the use of artificial photosynthesis to end world hunger, the extension of human lifespan, pinch fusion, the ceramics used in scramjet motors, monomolecular films: all developed from clues gathered from watching alien TV, but developed by people.

Alan had been lucky enough to live through those few months when everything in the world had changed utterly and forever. But it was not possible to recreate the excitement of the first months after alien TV had started, the banner headlines, the thousands of hours

of speculation on TV, the T-shirts and dolls and instant books, the bombing of a NASA ground station by Catholic extremists who claimed alien TV was a conspiracy by an alliance of Zionists and atheists. It had been something everyone had to have an opinion on, but then the media had moved on to the next thing which had caught the fickle public imagination. The world had moved on, leaving alien TV to the research-and-development laboratories, university academics, and obsessives like Howard.

So why, with the screen flickering through a series of otherworldly images, did Alan feel as if he had lost something? As if he suspected that Howard was still possessed by a secret which had once possessed him, but which he no longer possessed?

He sipped his gin-and-tonic and watched alien TV until his wife called to him. He flicked off the screen and dutifully went up.



Paul J. McAuley's next novel, due out later this year, is the third volume of his highly-praised "Confluence" trilogy. His last three stories in *Interzone* were "All Tomorrow's Parties" (issue 119), "The Secret of My Success" (issue 131) and "The Gardens of Saturn" (issue 137). The middle one of those was picked by Mark R. Kelly, *Locus's* short-fiction reviewer, as one of the ten best sf stories of 1998.

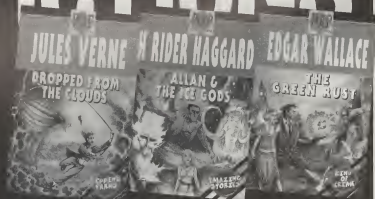
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White Dog



Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

Beauty and the Beast" was the first story Mother ever read to me. I have read it myself a myriad times in a variety of forms and seen countless dramatic renditions of it. At each telling or showing or reading, I have felt, for a moment, a sense of contentment. That is, until I fathomed that this was a fairy tale and had nothing whatever to do with me. Oh, it's not just that it's a fairy tale – everything is a fairy tale from my vantage point – it's that the Beast is a man and I am a woman.

What difference? Merely this: An ugly man may be saved by character; even the most hideous of men, as the fairy tale illustrates, can be loved for kindness and humour and a host of other qualities that fall neatly into a package labelled "inner beauty." But an ugly woman... well, I quickly learned that by no combination of graces or talents or virtues can she be considered lovely.

Humorists make a tired point of it:

"I've fixed you up with a date," says the sit-comedian.

"Oh?" responds the object of his largesse. "What's she like?"

"She has a great personality," he is assured.

Whereupon the charm-challenged moron moans tragically, "Oh, God! She's a bow-wow!"

The media assure us that the corollary is also true – a man will tolerate any amount of inanity and selfishness to adorn himself with Beauty; all stupidity can be forgiven it. In the female of the species, beauty can redeem a lack of character, but no amount of character can redeem a lack of good looks.

This is not to say that Gorgons don't have friends, for there is a certain type of male who will befriend the charmless female for no other reason than that, early in life, she seems almost "guy-like" in her gracelessness. Later, of course, he will abandon her, lest someone get the idea that they are an "item," but by this time, she will be much sought after by other, more attractive young women for the simple reason that they look good in comparison.

I've always thought the jealous Aphrodite was a fool not to have made Medusa her bosom buddy. How much simpler to have given the feckless Paris the choice between herself and the Gorgon – she'd have had the apple and the guy. Anyone stupid enough to even notice Medusa would have ended up as an ornamental coat rack in the goddess's front hall.

Am I comparing myself to Medusa? Yes, though I flatter myself that the comparison is favourable. After all, she turned men to stone for all eternity. My personal best is only five seconds.

Let me make it clear that I am not homely. (Now, there's a word! So old-world, so comfortable-sounding – as if the woman in question were a favoured but dilapidated love seat.) Nor am I unattractive, nor ugly. I am nothing short of grotesque. Hideous. I enter a room and conversations cease, heads turn and quickly return. Men turn to stone.

I was four, I think, when I became aware of this. My mother's and father's eyes had that myopia that is peculiar to parents, but in the eyes of strangers, teachers and family friends, I saw distress, veiled revulsion, and pity. In the eyes of other little girls lurked something like horror, while boys peeked at me with speculative amusement. I was slow to understand this, until I came to realize how different my mirror image was from theirs. They had glossy, colourful hair, and eyes of brown or blue or gray. Their cheeks were rosy, their lips pink, their faces a balance of normal human features.

I am shrunken, and colourless, as if water runs in my veins instead of blood. My flesh is like rice paper, its fine mesh of veins clearly visible, and my hair – if that really is the word for such an anarchistic mop – has all the vibrancy of cellophane. One of my young faux-friends referred to me once as the "visible girl." It stuck.

Oh, and my eyes – how can I possibly describe them? They are not gray or hazel or even albino white, but are as devoid of colour as a glass of water. "Jesus Lord!" exclaimed my friend of the "visible girl" epithet, "you've got puries!" "Oooo-ee-ee-ooh," school mates intoned when they passed me in the hall. "Spooky," the girls called me, and, "Ghost." The boys were worse: "Pasty-face" and "Slug" were two of their less innovative offerings. When I was about nine I realized that I looked, more or less, like the archetypal Whitley Strieber alien. I had by then lost count of how many Roswell jokes I'd been the butt of.

Fortunately, parents' eyes are calibrated differently than the rest of mankind's. I was my mother and father's little Moonbeam. Mother could gaze at my alien features and tell me I was beautiful. I swear to this day, she meant it.

I believe that's where I first got the idea that I could affect the way people saw me. Yes, my parents perceived me through a filter of love and pity, but I also provided a filter – the desperation with which I needed and desired their love and approval. Desperation demanded that I perform for them, that I be their happy little Moonbeam, an ethereal will-o'-the-wisp. Not quite understanding the nature of parental love, I believed that I won it by being as engaging as I was grotesque. That belief instilled in me the confidence I needed to win the regard of others who were not so impossibly blinded. Pity, sympathy – call it what you will – I learned, over the years, to milk human kindness for all it was worth.

I'm not bitter about that. Far from it. While I undoubtedly brought out the worst in those disposed toward cruelty, I brought out the best in anyone with even an ounce of compassion. I suppose in an abstract way, you could say I helped make them better human beings.

Of course, there are always those disinclined to kindness. They were harder to deal with. Their regard could wound; their words could draw blood. Such a one was Bobby Bane (an ironic and appropriate name, if ever there was one). If there was one *bona fide* bully in our tiny neighbourhood, it was Bobby, and he established himself as such from the moment his family moved in.

I heard rumour of him before we met. He had beaten up my friend Robin – who was twice my size – and taken away her bike and the popsicle her mother had given her as an afternoon snack. I was impressed. Robin was my own personal bully. So often did she terrorize me – levelling me with a push and taking whatever toy I happened to be playing with – that I now lay down on the sidewalk the moment I saw her coming. I considered Robin my friend solely by virtue of the fact that she did not call me names.

Robin was not the only child Bobby Bane flattened. Soon, neighbourhood Moms were in turmoil. They confronted Bobby's mother without satisfaction.

"Why," I asked my own mother, "is Bobby so mean?"

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "I suspect he's very lonely. His family's moved twice in the last year. He doesn't have any friends."

That, I thought, was perfectly understandable, and unlikely to change any time soon.

I met Bobby for the first time at the bottom of my driveway where I, in the floppy hat my mother tied to my head to shield my translucent skin from the Sun, was taking a group of Teddy Bears and dolls for a drive in my Radio Flyer. One moment I was alone, the next, I was facing a brush-cut, glaring terror at least twice my bulk and three years my senior.

His eyes widened when I looked into them, but the words he had prepared for me came out steady and strong. "Gimme the wagon, Spook," he said, and I was delighted that he had chosen such a gentle epithet. Still, his fists clenched and unclenched as if it were all he could do to refrain from tearing me limb from bloodless limb.

I did not lie down. Nor did I attempt to flee. Instead, I drew very close to Bobby Bane – close enough that he could count the tiny blue veins beneath my skin. Close

enough that he could imagine that my transparent eyes afforded him a view of the inside of my alien skull. I tilted my head, looked up into his face and said, "I know you don't really want to hurt me. You're a nice little boy. You just need a friend. Can I be your friend?"

Bobby Bane turned and left without uttering another word. The next time I saw him, he invaded a small group of neighbourhood children just as Robin's mom was passing out homemade cherry popsicles speared on little plastic forks. From that moment, he was just another neighbourhood kid. The Moms figured his parents must have "had a little talk" with him, but I knew, as our eyes met over our bright cherry ice cubes, that his transformation had not arisen from anything his parents had said.

Mother also knew this, having witnessed my confrontation with him from our kitchen window. "Meg," she said when I told her how Bobby had joined our play group, "you have a way about you."

A way about me. In my young mind, Way translated to "power" or "magic." The fairy tales I read were full of such things, and they inspired hope. An ugly princess might possess such goodness as would grant her the gift of Beauty. I was certain my powers, such as they were, did not run to literally making myself beautiful, but I now knew that they would allow me to wring compassion out of the kind, and tolerance out of the surly. Perhaps, in some sense, my Way was a veil behind which I could hide my repulsiveness, and if I could not transform myself, perhaps I could transform the way others saw me.

As I grew older, I discarded the idea of magical powers, of course, but I still recognized that what Mother had said was true – I did have a way about me. By the time I was in junior high school, I had concocted the theory that what I had exercised on Bobby Bane and countless others since, was a shrewd understanding of the human psyche. Everyone needed acceptance, even the seemingly needless.

The history of my religion provided me with a totem for my ability to parry the mindless, visceral hostility toward the alien: The White Dog.

It is recorded of the Son of the Founder of my faith that when He, in His twilight years, journeyed through the United States, He would travel the neighbourhoods of New York in a carriage accompanied by a handful of believers. In one of the affluent neighbourhoods on His accustomed route lived an elderly woman who had shown such hostility for the Master, as He was called, that the believers avoided her at all costs, finding other paths for Him to take to His appointments.

The Master, on the other hand, would seek her out, making certain that His carriage passed her house every morning where she could be seen taking the Sun on her front porch. While the believers cringed and prayed, the Master would smile and wave at the dowager, who would only glare at this Persian "mystic," then avert her gaze, her hands stroking and smoothing the silky fur of the small, white dog in her lap.

One morning, after He had been rebuffed repeatedly

by the hostile old woman, the Master bade the driver stop before her home. Over the protests of His companions, He debarked and strolled up the path to the front porch. Seating himself across from His enemy, He noted how very beautiful was the little white dog and inquired as to what kind of dog it was. Well, the woman loved that dog above all things, as the Master obviously knew. His praise of the animal unleashed such a flood of delight from her that she regaled her unwelcome guest with tales of the little animal's cleverness.

The Master was late for His appointments that day, but He had made a great friend. When the believers begged to know how He had transformed the forbidding harpy into a welcoming angel, He told them about her beloved pet. "Everyone," He said, and I imagined a twinkle in the deep azure eyes, "has a White Dog."

They did. And I learned to find those favoured pets unerringly and parlay them into, if not friendship, at least acceptance. When a first meeting threatened to be hurtful to me, I invoked the White Dog and diffused the potential for injury. Sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a word, sometimes with (I swear) a mere thought. "Spook" became an endearment or, at least, a good-natured tease on the tongues of my agreeable conquests. I fitted safely in.

When I reached high school, things changed. Fitting safely in was no longer enough. My male "buddies" had become single-minded automatons powered by testosterone and failure-fear, and my girlfriends were beginning to disappear into the nether realm of dating and hushed, giggle-punctuated conversations about the relative merits of this or that hormone-flushed, peach-faced "stud."

For a while it seemed as if my only role in all of this would be as a shill when my merely plain companions toured the local mall. (As I said, Doraverage, it pays to take Dorugy with you when shopping for potential princes.) I was alone so often, so suddenly, cloistered with my books, my parents were alarmed.

"What's the matter, Moonbeam?" Daddy asked me one solitary Saturday night. "Did you and Cora have a falling out? You're usually inseparable."

"Cora," I said, pretending not to care, "has a date."

"Cora?" Daddy repeated, and the corner of his mouth curled.

Cora, it should be noted, was overly plump, horribly myopic and tended to bray like a mule when surprised into laughter. Her round face was shiny with adolescence and her eyes behind her thick lenses had the naked, strained look of a perpetual squinter. She was my best friend and I adored her. Until now, we had done everything together.

"Cora," I affirmed, and felt a swift stab of betrayal. I had as good as gotten her that date. I'd been with her when she met him in the yogurt shop at the mall. I got Frozen Raspberry Truffle all over my best sweater and she got the klutz who put it there. Maybe, I thought, I could rent myself to other dateless high school girls. I could just see my billboard ad: *Gettin' late – no prom date? Call 1-800-OGRE. We guarantee speedy results.* I could call the business Rent-a-Wretch.

Daddy patted one knobby knee, then ruffled my lately close-cropped thatch of cellophane which Mother (bless her heart) had attempted to dye strawberry blonde. I so resembled a peach-coloured dandelion that I expected to see the fuzz float and scatter to the four corners of my room.

"Don't let it get you down, Megan," Daddy told me. "I expect you'll be dating any day now – and way too soon for your old man. You have a way about you," he reminded me with a smile, and left me alone with Charlotte Brontë.

I did have a way about me, and up till now I had employed it only in the interest of survival. But might it do more? Just how powerful, I wondered, as my mind returned to the gothic, was the White Dog? While I no longer believed in magic, I had also discarded the idea that I was a natural psychologist. I now was leaning toward the belief that I had psychic powers for which the White Dog was a focus. Then too, I had read much of tribal cultures, totems and animal guides. There was certainly a healthy dose of that in my adolescent philosophy.

I lay awake that night in a moral stew. I had invoked my totem purely in self-defence, never for self-aggrandizement. I had used it to dissuade attack, to promote tolerance and never to inveigle or seduce. I had never used it selfishly – had I?

When I went to sleep the situation was black and white – self-defence was acceptable, coercion was not. When I awoke, black and white had merged into a pleasant shade of gray. Self-defence and coercion were all but indistinguishable. And equally innocent, I assured myself. After all, I intended no harm to anyone. I only wanted a date. My manipulation would be guiltless because my motive was pure – salvation through right motivation.

I set to my task shyly at first – prodding, probing, the way I have seen chimps poke at a log full of ants. There was no one boy I doted on – quite frankly, I had considered forming such attachments ridiculous and futile. So, I issued a general appeal, replacing my habitual mental suggestion (I'm average, just average, ignore me) with a new one (I'm pretty, I'm charming, please notice me.)

You expect to hear that it didn't work, don't you? That I discovered it was mere winsomeness and warm-heartedness that made people befriend me. You're wrong. It did work. I got, not just one offer of a date, but two.

By the time my senior prom rolled around, I was dating even more steadily than Cora, who had lost weight and gotten contact lenses. But after the senior prom, I put this more powerful manifestation of my totem aside. I no longer suggested to all and sundry that I was anything more than someone they should feel amiably disposed toward.

You may wonder why. Hadn't I virtually assured myself a normal life? No. That was a chimera. Certainly, I could suggest to someone that I was a princess, win their regard, perhaps even enter into a relationship with them. But the thought of creating such a fairy tale and then having to live in it terrified me utterly. What if I should attract someone so much he should ask me to marry him? And what if I were to fall in love with him

and that love were to make me so stupid as to say "yes?" Would there not come a time when I would let the veil fall in the desperate hope that my husband would play Roxanne to my Cyrano and love me for me and not because of the White Dog? How would he feel when he realized that his princess was really a frog? How would you feel?

That prospect numbed me so much that I spent my entire post-high school summer sequestered with the first fruits of the Sarpy County library system.

I left home in the fall to attend a college in upstate New York, where a fine-arts program allowed me to surround myself with beauty both natural and man-made. I had a few friends, mostly female. To men I was more than transparent; I was invisible.

This was fine for most of my first semester. For another half semester I hung on in diligent self-denial, feeling noble and self-sacrificing, the power of the White Dog lying untapped. It was a lonely existence, the life of a perpetual witness – observer of everything, participant in nothing.

Finally, I succumbed. I gave in to the lure of being at least a fringe participant. I'd be fine, I reasoned, as long as I understood that this was a fairy tale and that at intervals I would be obliged to awaken myself, whisk a wrist across my brow and exclaim, "It was only a dream! Only a dream!"

I was content to haunt the fringes, at first, but of course that didn't last. Life is addictive. I could not resist the temptation to imbibe. I started my fall by merely suggesting that I was not only vivacious and winsome, but cute. That garnered me friends of both sexes and a role in one of those lighthearted groupings of young people that are the perpetual stuff of sitcoms. It was a happy association, a cozy rabble of art students who did nearly everything together, who saw each other through thick and thin, and who did not begin to pair off in earnest until the middle of their senior year.

The first pairing was within the group and hardly changed the dynamic at all, but the second brought a new face into the crowd, left only three singles and sounded the death knell of our carefree band.

I was saddened by it all, but also profoundly and painfully relieved. It meant I would never face the post-graduation goodbyes, the empty promises to write, to call, to reunite once a year at that special place. When I graduated, I shared tearful goodbyes with no one. My parents were all smiles as they watched me accept my diploma and helped me move my belongings to an apartment in Queens. I had already gotten a job at a respected art gallery in Manhattan, which was where I met Simon Bruce and fell irretrievably in love.

He was one of the gallery's clients, a talented, prolific artist with a broad range that somehow still managed to embody unique style. You could not see one of Simon's paintings and mistake it for anyone else's work. He used primaries as well as pastels, he rendered the dark and atmospheric as convincingly as he did the light and airy. His paintings were sharply realistic or they were whimsically surreal. He painted landscapes with as much conviction as he did portraits, but

he did not consider them landscapes. All his work, he pointed out to me, was about people. And it was, I realized. Even in the most overwhelming work of natural or sur-natural beauty, there was a person. And that person, in Simon's eyes, was the focus of the painting, no matter what position they occupied on the canvas.

He was as vivid as his work, with hair the colour of old gold and sea green eyes that could melt me at thirty paces. I was smitten, both with Simon and with his art. And, in that fragile and exalted state, I considered the unthinkable – pursuing the chimera. Then, I did more than consider it; I did it.

I no longer had any beliefs about my "powers," other than that they existed. I exploited the White Dog shamelessly – no, untrue, there was shame and I felt every morsel of it. But not enough – not nearly enough – to make me hesitate or halt. As we spoke of painting, I impressed upon him that I was, myself, a work of art – not merely pretty, but ravishingly, heart-breakingly beautiful. I knew I could attract him, of course, but could I make him fall in love with me?

Mornings: He dropped by the gallery with coffee and muffins. Afternoons: He happened by more and more often just in time for my lunch break. Finally, one night, he came by and asked me out to dinner.

Three months after our first official date, he took me on a carriage ride through Central Park. It was a crisp autumn evening and the moon hung over the Chrysler building like an errant balloon whose string had tangled with the spire. It occurred to me as we drove through the silky night that I must be nearly invisible beneath the moon – colourless light on colourless hair and skin. If he painted it, the work would be called "The Courting of the Ghost Maiden." The thought nearly made me giggle and then it made me pause and wonder how he saw me this night – how he saw me any night. I had no idea how I looked to the people I used my Way with. I never held in my mind an exact image when I "broadcast" my suggestions. They were amorphous, never specific.

As we drew to the end of our ride, to a place near the restaurant where he had made dinner reservations, I suddenly felt the evening groan under the weight of moment.

"Megan," he said, and took my hand and turned his face to me.

My heart stopped in my breast. Oh, dear God. Here it was – the moment of truth. I was suddenly terrified and practised the word "no" mentally over and over.

"Megan, marry me?"

I opened my mouth and the word "yes" fell out into his hands. I tried to make myself take it back, but I could not, so I cried what he took for tears of joy and cursed my own weakness.

I lived out the night in a state of siege, held hostage by my love for him and horror at what I had allowed to happen. It was no use saying that only I would be hurt by my deception. If he ever discovered the truth about me, he would be hurt. I considered dropping my façade. Several times that evening and all the evenings that followed, I came close to doing it, but I couldn't bear

the thought of how he might react.

Finally, one morning, I awoke with a suitable plan. I would let the veils drop gradually. That way there would be, for Simon, no sudden shock of revulsion, but merely a gradual cooling of ardour and the puzzled sensation of having just arrived someplace without knowing how he had gotten there. It would be no less painful for me, perhaps, and would only prolong the inevitable, but he would be spared me breaking off the engagement while he yet thought himself in love with me.

Having made this sensible decision, I did not pursue it as sanguinely as I daydreamed. Did you imagine I would? Any number of things stood between me and the detachment I aspired to. First and foremost, I loved Simon. And I wanted to believe that he loved me – me, not the phantasm. Sometimes, I would tell myself that, of course he really loved me because he was, after all, a man of great spiritual insight and maturity. And then I would find myself raging at him, for naturally, being a man, his physical attraction to me was the cornerstone of the relationship and the originating impulse for anything else he might feel. And that being the case, the removal of that cornerstone would cause the immediate collapse of everything.

The war waged daily in my heart: Simon, Good and True versus Simon, Frail and Male. That was the \$64,000 question which, thanks to inflation, had increased tenfold in value: *Confronted with my grotesque reality, Roxanne, will you yet love me?* Really, after being so betrayed, would he even like me?

In the weeks leading up to our wedding – a legendary thing I believed in with the same certainty that I believed in Avalon – I began to wish I had never called upon the White Dog to win Simon. And I waffled. Oh, how I waffled. Every time we met, I was going to begin dropping the veils. And every time we met I thought of a reason I should wait until the next time we met.

Ultimately, it was Simon who provided what was at once the most perfect and painful reason to put off the inevitable. He asked to paint my portrait.

Well, you can imagine (or perhaps you can't) the gamut of emotions that stampeded through me then. Terror – of what, I have no idea. Pleasure – it was, after all, a loving gesture. Curiosity – my ultimate undoing.

As I said, I had no idea how others saw me. I knew only that I could make myself attractive to them. I'd heard my hair compared to moonlight, my skin to milk, my eyes to a misty pool. (Yes, even I had the occasional male friend who considered himself a poet. I have the hastily scribbled napkin-verse to prove it.) I knew my physical self only from mirrors and rare photographs. Both of these are unrelentingly cruel in their honesty.

I wanted to see the portrait and I did not want to see it. Want won. I would not withdraw my veils until after it was complete, I told myself, so I could know just how strong were my powers of suggestion.

I sat for him in the evenings in his studio where he could manage the waning light so that it did not cover me with carnival colours. The light was gold and it was silver and it lasted for perhaps twenty minutes in the state he required. He would not let me see the paint-

ing, I knew, until it was finished. Simon never showed unfinished work to anyone.

After about two weeks of nightly sitting, my patience began to wane as my curiosity waxed. "Isn't it nearly done?" I asked.

"Nearly," he said. "Just a few more evenings."

But a few more evenings stretched into a week of evenings, then a week and a half. I have some self-control. In this case, it was abetted by my knowledge that my unveiling must begin the very moment the portrait's did. As much as I thirsted to see myself through Simon's eyes, I dreaded it. Not only would it end us (unless Simon were, indeed, the saintly Simon of my fairy tale), but it would, once and for all, establish the exact width of the gulf between Megan the Real and Megan the Imagined.

I have some self-control, I say, but not nearly enough to counterbalance either my curiosity or my penchant for flirting with pain. I still had not decided, as I surreptitiously entered Simon's darkened studio one night after a sitting, whether I would drop my veils one by one or all at once.

Do it gently, bade one voice. Let it fade naturally.

Get it over with, prodded another. Cut the cord and get on with life and don't ever do anything this idiotic again. (There's a promise I could never make in good conscience.)

I slipped into the studio as silently as a shaft of moonlight and took care to close the door behind me before touching the dimmer on the wall. The lights rose, revealing the easel with its draped canvas. I was resolute, and made my steps to it certain. I stood facing it for only a moment before reaching up and flipping aside the linen drape.

I have no words to describe the sight or the feelings it evoked. Thunderstruck. Overwhelmed. Numb. None of these things come close to that paralyzed, chaotic, silent shriek of emotion. Cold and heat struck me in turns – my cheeks burned and were bloodlessly icy. I raised my hands to them, but my numb flesh felt nothing.

Caught on the canvas in a wash of silver-gold, was the same pathetic creature that inhabited my mirror. And yes, I reminded myself, the real world. Simon had painted me as I was – a Spielbergian alien with stick arms, huge bottomless eyes, fright-pale shock wig and see-through flesh.

In my struggle for meaning, I didn't hear the studio door open. "Do you like it?" he asked from behind me.

I half turned, then stopped myself. "I'm... overwhelmed," I said, honestly. My voice shook.

"You didn't answer my question." He moved to stand beside me. "I think it's a very good likeness. Do you?"

"Too good," I quipped, then, "Is that really the way you see me?"

"I suppose it must be."

I let go of the White Dog, let it escape – lick, bark and howl.

"It's the way my eyes see you, at any rate. But it has to be filtered through the heart, doesn't it? That," he added, stepping around to face me, "was what I wanted to get on canvas. I tried, but I think I failed."

I have never wanted to cover my face so badly in my entire life. I started to raise my hands to do it, but he stopped me.

"What's wrong, Meg?"

Did I try to explain the White Dog? Did I try to make him believe I had these powers that had worked on everyone but him? "I had no idea," I finally managed to say, "that I was so grotesque to you."

"Grotesque?" His eyes went past me to the painting. "No, Megan. Unusual. Exotic. Other-worldly. Never grotesque. Look again."

I did. And I saw that I – the painted I – was part of a landscape that was not, Simon would have reminded me, really a landscape at all. The eyes were not just eyes, they were mirrors, and the image that repeated in them was a cloud-draped moon. The pale hair faded into snow-covered hills. The mouth had a Mona Lisa tilt to it and lips that seemed poised to speak or laugh. The only real colour in the picture, which was almost stark in its Sun, Moon and midnight palette, was in a rose held breast high, cradled in the bloodless hands as if being offered to the viewer. It was a red rose and at its centre was a tiny, semi-circular hearth in which a fire blazed welcome.

I realized something about Simon in that moment. Simon did not paint people into landscapes, he painted the landscapes within people – landscapes in which they moved and lived as surely as they moved and lived in the world outside.

I realized something about my own internal landscape too, of course, but such things are best left unsaid. What I will say is that I was forced to abandon my cynicism. What the Prophets have said is true after all, that what is in a person's heart – their inner landscape – is more important in life and love and loyalty than the outer one, at least among those who are aware of such things.

With Simon's arms around me I leaned to look more closely at the hearthside scene. At the foot of the chair – a splash of white.

"Is that a dog?"

He chuckled. "I don't know why I put that there. Pure whimsy, I guess. It just seemed... homey. Welcoming. Is it silly?"

"No, not silly. Not silly at all," I said, and began to wonder about the existence of Avalon.



Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Doctor Dodge" (issue 125), "Silver Lining" (issue 130), "Who Have No Eyes" (issue 134) and "Beggars Might Ride" (issue 137). A reviewer recently commented that she is a regular *Analog* writer who has become a regular *Interzone* writer. He seemed to find this puzzling.

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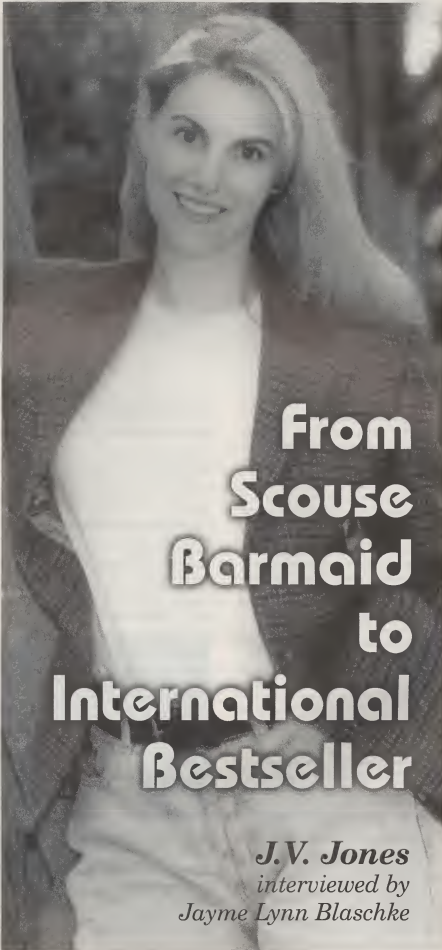
Julie Victoria Jones burst out of the shushpile and onto the bestseller lists with her 1995 novel, The Baker's Boy. The next two instalments in the "Book of Words" trilogy, A Man Betrayed and Master and Fool, also achieved bestseller status. In just three short years, Jones has become one of the biggest new names in fantasy, and her fourth book, The Barbed Coil, looks set to continue that tradition.

The Barbed Coil is a stand-alone fantasy. With all the epic multi-volume fantasy series in bookstores today, that's something of a vanishing species.

Well, I'd written a three-book series, and it came to about 14-1500 pages. At the end of it, I was absolutely strung out because it was a very difficult job to bring all the plot elements together. I was juggling constantly, and I really wanted something that was just a one-off story, so I could go "Ha! Finished it!" It's an interesting lesson, because you have to be much more disciplined with yourself when you're doing a one-volume work, because you just can't keep introducing plot lines as you wish. In *The Book of Words* whenever I introduced an interesting character – even if he was just a minor character – I'd say "Oh, he's interesting. I'm going to do something with him." And before I knew it, I had ten plot lines I had no intention of starting with. So when I came to do *The Barbed Coil* I really had to be tough with myself. But I think one of the things that's interesting, more satisfying in doing a one-off book, is that you get a really big ending. In a trilogy, because you have so many plot lines, you have lots of little separate endings before the end. It often takes up half the last book to resolve all the various plot lines. But for the one-off book, it has one big, bad ending, one mother of an ending at the end – which is where it's supposed to be.

The Barbed Coil is a completely new creation, set apart from the world you developed for The Book of Words trilogy. What were you able to do in it that you weren't able to do in the previous ones?

One of the differences is that I took magic much more seriously. Magic in *The Book of Words* was done on the fly as I went along. I didn't give it any thought beforehand. But for this one, and I went out of my way to (a) give it



From Scouse Barmaid to International Bestseller

J.V. Jones
interviewed by
Jayme Lynn Blaschke

a definite logic, and (b) I wanted it to be really exciting and very primitive and believable. So I think that's the main thing that's different. I definitely set out to create a real magic system, a complete, whole magic system.

A magic system based on art. How did that come about?

I was dealing with very detailed artwork from a very specific time period in the British Isles – it's called Insular art, and it was done in seventh- and eighth-century England and Ireland. It's peculiar to the British Isles. It's a very complex, detailed artwork – squares of parchment no bigger than the palm of your hand, filled with patterns so minute, so detailed that you need a magnifying glass to see all the details. The first time I saw a page from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* – which is a prime example of Insular art – I thought, it's like looking at a spellbook. There's something really remarkable about it. It obviously takes a very obsessed man to do this, and because it was done in God's name, it had a spiritual power to it. For me, that seems like there's almost a magic to it.

So are you a connoisseur of fine art?

I'm really into art. I always have been. Like most people, I think, I was into Renaissance art and the Post-Renaissance art – everything following that. Sort of the Western art of the past five centuries. I've never really looked at primitive art – I don't even know if you can call it primitive – but anything pre-Renaissance would never interest me much. Then I was given a book on this by a friend of mine. It contained detailed plates of *The Book of Kells*, which is the work of Irish monks and is considered the best example of Insular art to have survived intact. *The Book of Durrow* and the *Lindisfarne Gospels* are the two other surviving examples. Much of the artwork of the time has been destroyed – burned, lost at sea, or shredded by treacherous monks. They're the most amazing things.

There was a lot of similar work done in Byzantium.

Yes. That's actually a very good point. They took Byzantine art and they took it to England, and then over centuries developed their own particular breed of it. They really Westernized it. And the most interesting thing about this, I think, the most telling thing about this is no matter what page you look at, what illumination you look at, you always find a deliberate error or omission. You find a bit where the paint hasn't been applied. You find a bit that's obviously a mistake that doesn't go with the rest of the pattern. And the

reason behind this is the monks didn't want to rival God's perfection. It was an act of humility.

That's an interesting mindset, believing they could actually rival God's perfection.

I think it's probably the most detailed artwork that's ever been produced, the most painstaking. If anything rivals God's perfection, those do, and I think the monks were aware at the time that what they were doing was incredible. They were highly valued – it wasn't an artwork that wasn't appreciated at the time. It was highly appreciated, and the illuminated manuscripts they did were objects owned by kings and dukes and lords and bishops, so it wasn't an art for the people.

In The Barbed Coil you have a contemporary heroine who is transported to a magical realm, a common fantasy device. You've said that's what attracted you to it, in fact, but do you think it's possible to do something truly original in fantasy?

I think that's a problem with all fiction – not exactly a problem, but a fact of all fiction is that everything's been done before. I can't remember the last time I read a truly unique, remarkable novel. It's always a case of working with what's been done before and trying to give it your own fresh interpretation or new spin. I think that's the most one can hope to do as a novelist in the 20th century. Maybe I'm being a bit limiting, maybe I lack imagination, but I can't see

how we can do anything that's truly original these days.

You've built your novels around the traditions of high fantasy: Questing, brave heroes, that sort of thing. Is this a form you set out to write, or did it just come to you naturally?

I made no decision. I had no plan when I started writing. I'm not very good at planning. When I started writing *The Baker's Boy* I had no plan, I had no outline, I had no character details, I had nothing. I invented it all as I went along. I have since learned that's not exactly the right way to do things, but that's what I did, and it turned out to be a reflection of me and my tastes. There was a lot of humour in the book, because I tend to be a naturally funny person – at least I think I am, but I'm probably the only one who does. There's a lot of food details, because I'm a food fanatic. I wouldn't say it's autobiographical in any way, but I'd say there's a lot of me and my tastes in that book. And that's also my taste for high fantasy, which I read and enjoyed for many years previously. That translated into the book as well.

Do you see yourself branching into other genres?

I've actually done some short stories. I haven't tried to get any of them published because I'm a little shy of showing my short stories to other people. I write science-fiction short stories, I write things about the internet, which I'm heavily involved in. I know a lot about the internet because I work with it. About virtual reality. One of the great interests of mine is medicine. I love medicine, I love medical journals. I'm one of the few laymen who reads these weird medical journals, and I'd like to do medical thrillers. But at the moment, I've been contracted to write some more books, another fantasy trilogy, which I'm happy to write, because it's taking me to new areas. It's not the same old, same old. I'm very interested in other areas, but it's a case of "Would anyone buy them from me?" I'm not sure. I haven't tested the waters yet.

If it's not part of your career yet, why do it? Novels are, after all, much more lucrative.

I write short fiction for the same reason I wrote *The Baker's Boy*, which is purely for my own enjoyment. I read quite a lot of short stories, and if I see something that I would like done I have to write it myself. If there needs to be a short story about fish, I take it upon myself to write one. I never show them to anyone.

Insecurity? From someone who's sold

a quarter of a million books all over the world? Why?

Because they're not fantasy. It's also a case of lack of confidence. I'm not sure a science-fiction short story or a virtual-reality short story or medical short story would be accepted. And I'm not entirely sure of the markets, either. I know science fiction and fantasy get lumped together, but where would I send a virtual-reality story or a medical story? So I do it really just to keep my end in it, as we English say.

Four books, four high fantasies. Any concerns about becoming typecast?

I haven't been around for very long yet. I'm still a new name. A lot of readers, I don't think, have heard of me yet, so I'm not worried at this point, but I definitely think it will be a consideration in the future. I think I've got it in me to write other novels and other works. I've got interests in other areas, but at this point, I'm not worried about it.

Your current project is set in the same world as The Book of Words trilogy. What did you do to avoid covering the same ground?

It's set in the same world, but it's set in a place that's separated by a huge range of big old mountains. It's going to be a very new setting, a whole new terrain. It's not high-medieval at all, it's much more barbaric – half-Russian, half-Scottish, half-Inuit. I'm very excited about it because I get to explore different cultures. Plus, I just like anything Scottish – anything but haggis, really, which is quite disgusting. At Worldcon in Scotland, every morning at the breakfast bar: Haggis staring me in the face. It put a whole new slant on each day. I can still close my eyes and see it now.

When you do a series of books using the same setting, there's always the problem of readers wanting something exactly like the last book you did, only different. Have you encountered that?

That's actually one of my concerns with this new book. It's a whole new set of characters, it's not a high-medieval setting with tall castles and knights. There're no knights at all, so I'm a bit worried that readers of *The Book of Words* will at first say "Where's Bodger and Grift? Where's all these characters that we love?" I think the reason why people enjoyed *The Book of Words* was the characters, so I'm presenting a whole new range of characters for them, and some of them aren't quite so loveable as the last lot. That's a concern for me: "Will people accept this?" But I've got to do something different, because I don't want to keep doing the same old same old.

What new places did this book take you?

I enjoy doing research on new places, and it was delightful for me doing the research on Russians and Scottish and especially the Inuit Indians. I discovered the most remarkable facts. I'm like a walking fact-o-phile of the Inuits. It's a remarkable, remarkable culture. They're a very sexy people. I have to tell you – those long, dark winters, there's nothing for them to do. And the depression that comes with long, dark winters has been well-documented. So what do you do during all these dark months? Well, the Inuits have sex a lot. One of the problems with the Inuits is that they practised infanticide, at least for females, because they were considered quite worthless. What this did was make females in very high demand, obviously, so there was a lot of kidnapping of females, and there's a lot of female-sharing. It's not unusual to have one female married to two hunters, and she's in a great position. There's a lot of wife-swapping that goes on, and it has gone on traditionally for many years, and it still goes on to this day. It adds variety to those long winter nights. It's funny that the wife-swapping generally only goes on in winter. So it's delightful reading about this culture which is very open-minded about sex. They think nothing of it. It's just part of the culture.

One thing that sets your work apart from other fantasies is your villains. You have very distinctive villains – not the standard megalomaniac world-conquerors.

I love the bad guys. I was always one of those people, from a very early age, whenever I watched a film,

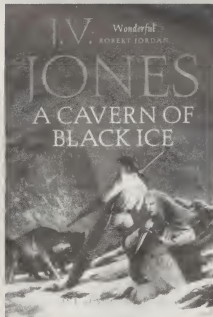
whenever I read a book, I always wanted the villain to win. That's always been in me. I can think of some films I've watched where everyone hissed at the villain, and I'd be going "Oh, please let the villain win. Just once!" Hollywood and America has this thing where a villain must be thwarted. In England I think there's less of that "Good must conquer evil." But in America it's very much the way of things. Being English, I can see that sometimes we English people like the villains to win, that's why Tavalisk is hanging on at the end. I think it's very viable, he's such a slippery little character that he was going to get away with it. And I liked the thought of him going out there and being evil for the rest of his life. So I really enjoy the villains. Plus, the villains get the best lines to say. Who wants to hear the good people speak? That's dull. They just say good things. Give me the villains any day.

You live in California now, but you literally grew up working in a Liverpool pub. Not exactly legal, but it must've given you a unique insight on the human condition.

I did, yes, from a very early age. It's very enlightening, working in a Liverpool pub. You learn a whole lot of slang words for everything, but if you use them your mum gives you a big slap around the ears. I think it opens your eyes to the world, very early on. Plus, I think where it helped with my writing is that I have a lot of snappy lines in my books, and that's because it's the art of the comeback. If you're a barmaid in Liverpool, you get these wisecracking guys coming in saying things to you every day, and you've got to have a comeback for them, otherwise you're not going to get a very good tip, or they're going to hound you into the ground. So you have to have a wisecracking mouth, and my sister and I both had tongues like lasers when we were teenagers. We used to earn a lot of tips for it, because it's one of those things that's appreciated, the ability to put someone down. If you could put someone down with few words, that's high form in Liverpool.

We probably can't trace this back to your Liverpool days, but you're very into computers. You have a website, JVJ.com, that's very interactive, almost like a game in places.

I think the most important thing when I set out to do a website was I wanted it to be fun. I'd seen a lot of websites, and they were all "This is what I've done, this is what I wrote, this is a picture of me. Me, me, me." I don't think they mean to do that in an egotistical way, it just shows a lack of imagination. I wanted to do some-



thing for people, and there's a lot of original material on the site that's done just for people who come on-line. I'm trying to give something back to the people who've bought my books. Here they can come to my website and get some stuff for free and they get a chance to play games and there's a lot of stuff to read and to do there. Of course, I'm just naturally a bit nutty. I do all this programming late at night, and what seems like a good idea after midnight usually isn't in bright daylight. It's a hobby now. It's my only hobby - I haven't got time for anything else.

So do you surf the web a lot?

Yes. I really shouldn't tell you this, but yes, I surf a lot. I don't actually get much information from it - I do no research on the web. I find it absolutely useless for research, because you spend your whole day going to red-herring sites. I don't like research on the web. I don't do any. I just do it purely for fun.

Any particular favourite sites you frequent?

Yeah, I enjoy the newsgroups. I read lots of newsgroups. All the sf newsgroups I enjoy. I lurk around there - I'm a bit shy of leaving messages, because I'm frightened of criticism. If people are discussing my book, I don't like to go in there and give them a definitive answer because once you produce a work, it's out there. You shouldn't be telling readers what it's about, they should make their own minds up. So I lurk. I do a lot of lurking, really. I'm a very lurky sort of person.

You've taken interaction with your readers to another level on your homepage. You had a section where you asked your readers to choose the name of your next series. That's got to be a first of some sort.

I talked to my editor about it, and I told her that *The Dark Spire* series is winning in the poll. She really likes *The Dark Spire*, so it looks like those people have actually chosen the title. Because it had 180 votes as opposed to 90 votes for the next nearest one. So I've actually done something. I think this is what the web is for. It's for interaction, and it's for people to have a say in things. It wasn't a gimmick on my part. I was discussing it with a friend, and no one had a consensus on it, so I thought I'll let people vote because it's such an easy thing to do. I've had about 500 people vote for a title, which is really good.

One of the most popular sections of your website is a direct offshoot of *The Book of Words: Bodger and Grift*. Did you ever have any clue that these two

characters would become so enormously popular?

I get a lot of people asking for Bodger and Grift tee-shirts. They get more e-mail than I do, without a doubt, I'm actually doing service to American women. People write to Grift because he's a know-it-all, saying "I'm having problems with my girlfriend, what should I do?" And I write back as Grift and I say "Well lad, you need to buy her a gift." See, the women of America should thank me for that, because if they're getting gifts, it could just be me.

There's more of that bawdiness and the Liverpool pub coming though.

Yeah, definitely. They're hugely popular, and the most popular thing they do is medieval pickup lines. When I did this, I didn't think anyone would respond. I was really sure that medieval pickup lines was just some peculiarity that only I was interested in. Well, I think it's on a lot of university sites now, because I get a lot of university students who frankly should be working when they're not, and they send me the most ridiculously stupid, bad pickup lines of all time. They're so stupid, they're brilliant, actually. And I get about 50 of them a week, and I don't know what to do with them all. I haven't time to put them all on the website, but they're hugely popular. And people say they're using them, but I can't believe anyone actually would.

Obviously, growing up in Liverpool influenced you and your writing greatly, but were there any individuals that had an impact on you?

I wouldn't say I had any role models or any particular encouragement to be a writer. The only influence I had was that I was an avid reader from a very early age. I read everything. I literally read everything I could. I read romance novels because that's what my sister read, so that was in the house. I read Dickens, because that was on my mum's bedside table, and I think Dickens influenced me greatly as a writer. I'm not saying I'm anywhere near as good as him, I'm just saying his character names and his characterizations are elements I admire - and I try to copy his example of always having minor characters interesting, so they're not just on-screen, off-screen, and then you don't even think about them. I like to have someone more interesting to do the job.

You're now published in Britain, North America, Russia, Germany, Holland... You're just sweeping Europe. Are you building much of an international fan base?

I was talking to my editor about

this last night. Warners' foreign sales exports books to every corner of the world where people might want to read English books. My books go to Australia, they go to Guam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Italy... and I know this for a fact, because I kept getting letters from people in the Philippines and Malaysia and Guam. I know they're reading the American edition, because my website address is in the American edition and not the English edition. It's remarkable that people are reading my book in the most amazing places.

It must be a heady experience to see your words translated into French or Cyrillic.

It's amazing. It really is amazing for someone who was never encouraged to write. In England, you're not brought up with the "American Dream." No one tells you that you can do anything when you're in England. I never got any encouragement, not much career advice in England, or anything. Then I came out here, and maybe it was some of the American media and the American attitudes found me, where it's always "You can do anything you set your mind to." I never heard that in England growing up, so I never wrote in England. It took living for a few years out here before I thought I could actually be a writer. [Z]

Note: It seems the "Dark Spire" suggestion was not taken up by her publishers, because Julie Jones's fifth novel, set in the Russian/Scottish/Inuit world referred to above (just out in the UK from Orbit at £16.99), is entitled *A Cavern of Black Ice*: Book One of *Sword of Shadows* - Editor.

interzone

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The truly remarkable thing about *A Bug's Life* is that it's the first Disney animation post-Walt to be almost completely irreprehensible: to lack all the qualities of queasy familial ideology, self-help psychoburble and shameless reassurance about the creativity of consuming that have made New Disney such a peerless Microsoft of the imagination. Almost unprecedentedly for Disney, *A Bug's Life* is a film you could happily let your kids watch. The board execs must be tearing their rugs. It's not that it's exactly subversive of the Disney gospel, but there are some remarkable silences. The hero's descent into self-doubt isn't addressed in therapizing homilies; nobody gives anyone else a healing hug; and parenting is a complete non-theme. Tweezer open the casing, and there's nothing more noxious inside than an inoffensive homily about creative people (esp. of the showbiz kind) being better role-models than warriors.

Insofar as *A Bug's Life* is about anything at all, it's about showmanship, entertainers saving the world from tyranny by inspiring joy in disempowered hearts so the little folk will rise as one and cast off the do-nothing overclass. But even that's a lesson that can be read at least as much against the Disney machine as for it, depending on where you cast the tyrannical overlord grasshoppers (talentless workshies who demand impossible levels of product to be delivered by a late-Fall deadline). On one reading of the fable, the real story of *A Bug's Life* is the grasshopper/ant relationship between Disney and John Lasseter's Pixar team, whose distinctive voice is finally here able to reassert itself independently of the uneasy Disney master narratives that so fettered the pleasures of *Toy Story*. The achievement and the curse of *A Bug's Life*, in fact, are that it's more a film than a cross-media franchising opportunity. It's hard to see *A Bug's Life* making anything like the money for Disney that *Toy Story* did, if only because a glance around the merchandising shows how very much harder it's been to cash in on.

Superficially, *A Bug's Life* conforms to the marketing template, with its obligatory collectable cast of colourful action characters for little hands to purchase individually. Even this much hasn't been easy, though, given that the ant-colony setting rather limits the opportunities for individual characterization – so that the inspired conscription of a mixed-species circus troupe is the team's salvation in more ways than one. More importantly, it's far from clear that tots actually want poseable figures of big-eyed cartoon bugs, or character storybooks with insidious titles like *First Disney Friends*, in the way that they hungered for hard-pos-



able soft Woodies and plastic-bodied Mr Potato Heads. Pixar's millstone is that, whatever the qualities of the entertainment itself, *Toy Story* was one of the most brilliantly-conceived merchandising concepts in the industry's history. It achieved a perfect fusion of sign and signified, toy and character, and shamelessly exhorted defenceless small punters to invest complex anthropomorphic emotions in consumer objects. The only way Pixar can replicate this is with *Toy Story 2*, to which *A Bug's Life*, for all its charms, is little more than a schedule-plugging stepping stone.

All the same, *A Bug's Life* is easily as brisk, bright and witty a kids' film as has been seen since the last one of these; and that ought by rights to be enough. In keeping with the film's message, and despite our heroes' struggle to complete their project before their rivals' deadline, it turns out not to be quite the bug-eat-bug world alleged, and there's easily room for two CG ant fables about plucky individuals romancing the princess and saving the colony. If we're really score-carding, *Antz* probably wins on its ants, lead character, dialogue gags and all-round conceptual pottness, with a special award for soundtrack songs, while *Bug's Life* gets the points on support cast, visual gags, technical virtuosity and market positioning, with a special gong for not having any songs at all apart from that unfortunate Randy Newman thing at the end. To call it a tie may be the kind of dangerous socialist thinking that gets you locked up south of the 49th; but this looks eerily like one.

Thats shouldn't perhaps surprise, because one of the strengths of expensively-animated movies is the enforced discipline they impose on basic film-making values and priorities. They keep the performers in their place: you can afford an impossibly all-star cast, and yet control every last tic of every performance on screen. The costs are much more directly tied to actual footage shot than in live-action, encouraging tight, snappy writing and trim running times. (Even the indulgent end-credit horseplay in *A Bug's Life* can only have got through because Disney movies get most of their takings from sell-through, which is precisely where the rewindable out-take gags add value.) Above all, the fact that every frame has to be built up from storyboard makes it economic to get the script 100% right before the first cel is pencilled. In contrast, for a stunning object lesson in all the ways human film-making can go blooey, you only have to look (as few enough have) at the drowned giant that is *Meet Joe Black*.

Richly, majestically awful in the way that only a truly epic cinematic mistake can be, this three-hour update of *Death Takes a Holiday* is one of the great modern monuments to What Were They Thinking? Responsibility appears to rest with director/producer Martin Brest, whose unlikely pet project it seems to be; but greenlighting for this bizarrely-misconceived folly was presumably on the basis of high-concept casting (Brad Pitt as Death, taking a few days off from serving warrant on Sir Tony Hopkins while he checks out the earthshaking action, romances Claire Forlani, and gets in touch with his human side). This is all too familiar: at a certain peak, a star's castability rises so high that he only ever gets miscast. It happened with Schwarzenegger at his height ("Hey, let's cast against type! We can make him an infant-school teacher/Danny de Vito's twin brother/pregnant/et cetera/et cetera!"), and here's this decade's most castable going the same way. ("Hey! Let's cast him as Death! and let's forbid him to do any of the kinds of acting he's good at! and how about we can bring in Leonardo as the reincarnation of Hitler! and Demi Moore as the Bodhisatva! – no, wait, I haven't finished – what's with the needle – I don't need any – no – keep away from *mmf* – *nnnf*!")

A starry vehicle it certainly is. Indeed, *Meet Joe Black* may be the most extreme example yet of a movie written entirely for and around its stars, with dialogue stuffed with the most unctuous ego-buttering lines ever heard on screen. "How come,"

murmurs the inexplicably-besotted Forlani to a blankly-mugging Pitt, "a man so handsome, intelligent, different in the most seductive way, powerful, is all alone in this world?" And again: "There's something so indescribably sexy about you standing in the middle of a crowd. I could make love to you *right here*." Worse still, the leads' alleged (but largely-imperceptible) charisma is repeatedly invoked to plug major motivation holes. "Why are you doing all this?" Hopkins asks his comedy daughter Marcia Gay Harden at one of the moments of high inexplicability, and she responds: "I do it because I love you. *Everybody* loves you." Come to that, why *should* the Reaper, looking for a grand tour of the human world in all its diversity and glory, fix on Hopkins' dreary round of dimly-lit dinner parties and boardroom meetings? "I chose you," says Brad, "for your verve, your excellence, and your ability to instruct." Love story or no, it's disconcerting to meet a film in which everyone loves everyone else quite so volubly, and for so very little evident reason.

But the real iceberg on which this floating palace founders is that it doesn't seem to have been written by writers at all. The screenplay credits acknowledge three sets of writers (though it's a rule of thumb that Writers' Guild regs only permit the cube root of the actual number of writers to be credited), and the script itself gives the impression that each team in turn has been thrown off a building and the actors' suggestions incorporated instead. "Wake up and smell the thorns" has already attained a kind of legendary status, but there are plenty of even more astonishing coups of unspeakability, as though the writers have taken lots of giggly drugs and got revenge for their serial mistreatment by lacing the actor-friendly monologues with spoof lines that will blow up on screen. The climactic scene alone offers (i) "You're looking at a man who's not only walking into the valley of the shadow of death, he's galloping through it"; (ii) "You will not be counting the days and the months and the years - you'll be counting millenniums (*sic*) in a room with no doors"; and the truly jaw-untying (iii) "machinations so Machiavellian."

Redeeming features are few, though the Jeffrey Tambor character is a rare chance for a fine actor to play something other than a buffoon. By far the best minutes are those where the real Pitt (pre-Reaper) woos and wins Forlani in their chance coffee-shop encounter at the start: a teasing glimpse of the star on classic form, and a much-needed incitement to hang in through the next two-and-a-

half hours in the certainty that this character will return in the final minutes. (He does, but alas! seems still hung over from his days spent dead.) Improbably for the usually-brisk Brest, who was once capable of *Midnight Run*, it may very well be the slowest movie ever made in Hollywood. Thoughtfully, the makers have ensured that the running time doesn't require you to miss anything essential during the inevitable loo trip mid-movie, since it's quite possible to nip out during one of the smoochy closeup scenes, perform the business at leisure, and return to the auditorium to find the same line still being delivered. Shots take *forever*; nothing is done briefly that can be done interminably; and every line of dialogue that could be excised and left to nuance has instead been said three times over. The film opens with Sir Anthony wandering around in the shadows of a huge, hollow, mausoleum-like folly, which turns out to be remarkably prescient of the film as a whole: in its own way, a modern marvel of its medium, fully as vast and futile as *The Postman*, while managing against all odds to be a lot less fun.

P*actical Magic* is equally an astrocentric project trailing a string of sacked writers, but an emphatically distaff version - which means that it's novelistic in source and shape, centred on girly things like witches and childrearing, and might as well have "box-office stiff" blazed wide across the posters from the start. It's dimly based on a novel by Alice Hoffman, one of those prolific New England campusland novelists prescribed in self-assessment gender tests: if you can name three of her books, you're a middle-class female, and if you've never heard of her, you're

a bloke and here's your complimentary car gift catalogue and souvenir miniature golfbag. As a film, it exists principally as a value vehicle for two peaking actresses (Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman) to assert their range in a character-driven, gynocentric fantasy about sisterhood across generations, as the sweet homemaking one and the wild free spirit (guess which way round) try to reconcile their need for 90s-singles romantic fulfilment with their matrilineal heritage as nth-generation witches.

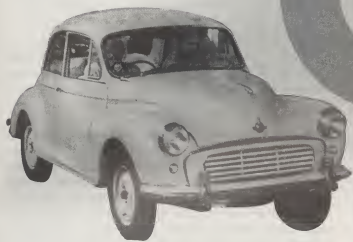
Sometimes sweet, increasingly saccharin, and by the end merely sickly, *Practical Magic* is another work of wish-fulfilment in which, just as in *Joe Black*, true love gets hit by a truck in the opening minutes, only to be reborn the long way round by a protracted rite of sympathetic movie magic. Like its characters, the novel has been heftily knocked about in the name of love by its chain-gang of celebrity writers (including Robin Swicord and Akiva Goldsman). There's one good line (Det. Aidan Quinn: "Did you or your sister kill James Angelov?" Bullock: "Oh yeah. Couple a times"), and a lot of rather strange ones that might look decorously frilly on a page but don't sit well on famous lips: "I dream of a love that even time will lie down and be still for"; "sometimes we stay up all night just worshipping each other, like bats."

In the end, though, west-coast movie values squeeze out east-coast literary flouncing. (Even the suspiciously-picturesque white-timbered Massachusetts coastal locations turn out to have actually been filmed a short ride downsouth from Seattle.) The finished movie unhappily recapitulates its own passage from novel to star vehicle, modulating at the midpoint from a pleasantly novelistic, actress meander into a by-numbers Hollywood plot and climax. Though the ostensible theme is the power of sisterhood and matriarchal narrative values, in the end the boys have had their way, and virile storytelling rises from the grave to repossess the blandly-amiable feminine plotting of the first half. The grotesquely ill-judged and nonsensical final scene, especially, seems positively to celebrate the film's eventual transmutation into something unrecognizably cheaper and dumber than the material from which it began: from something like *Housekeeping* to something scarcely distinguishable from *Bed-knobs and Broomsticks*. It's depressing, but it's the system. In the long run, when the last leaf falls and the grasshoppers come for their tribute, most clients find it safest just to pay up. Sooner or later, everyone does.

Nick Lowe



Brad Pitt, looking nothing like death, whom he plays in *Meet Joe Black*



Go with the Flow

Ben Jeapes

“Why, ‘To Gran?’” I asked.

The professor had been about to pass me a cup of coffee. His book, the cause of the interview at his house, lay on the table between us.

“I beg your pardon?” he said.

“Why is your book dedicated, ‘To Gran?’” I said. I was deliberately keeping my voice casual but the matter had been bothering me all afternoon.

We’d got on well in this interview, gathering material for a feature profile I was producing, and he had really opened up. We had gone through his career, from undergrad to PhD whose work in fluid dynamics was being applied by the European government to social mechanisms, with astounding success. He had commented on the rumours that the 2036 Nobel was apparently sewn up. For background, we had even talked about his home life, his wife and children (to whom the book wasn’t dedicated).

But...

The book that started it all off, in its paper version, was 600 pages of small font and equations. Five pages of acknowledgements, in an even smaller font. A massive bibliography that needed a magnifying glass. A 20-page foreword by a bigwig from Princeton. And the title! *Go with the Flow: A Sociological Extrapolation of the Effects and Applications of Transient Pressure Propagation on Human Populations*. Concision was not the author’s style.

And yet, “To Gran.”

“No sugar, wasn’t it?” the professor said, putting the cup down in front of me.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Gran,” he said. “Well, she looked after me a lot when I was a boy. My parents were constantly breaking up and she was the one secure thing I had. She had her own children quite late in life and one of them was killed in a car crash, so she really, really doted on me. In some ways she was the archetypal granny – a frail old battleaxe. She’s not with us any more, died in the ‘teens when I was a student –”

“That would be a dedication for your autobiography,” I interrupted, “or your first novel. But a scholarly work like this? It just... it just jars.”

“Does it?” he said. He looked thoughtfully at the recorder, then leaned forward and turned it off.



I suppose it started (he said) when I’d been dumped on Gran suddenly so that Mum and Dad could Sort Things Out again over the half-term break. This was happening more and more by the time I was ten but Gran never minded having me.

I was in the living room doing a jigsaw, which was the highest-tech form of entertainment in her household, when I heard the phone ring and her singsong “Hello” as she answered it. Then:

"...well, I did ask for the week off so I could look after my grandson..."

"...oh, the poor dear, broken right through? In plaster..."

"...well, dry-slope skiing isn't really for our generation..."

"...well, I could cover for her, but my grandson..."

"...take him with me? Are you sure that's wise?"

One of Gran's few faults was the failure to realize her voice carried. And I was only ten feet away from her, through the wall.

"...hang on, let me write it down..."

I heard her say goodbye and hang up, and then she popped her head around the door and beamed at me. "Do you want to come for a drive, dear?" she said.



Gran lived in one of those little greenbelt villages within the M25 – a small, secluded place that you wouldn't have thought was only a few miles from the country's capital.

"Can you read a map, dear?" she said as we got into her Mini, parked (as it always was) outside her garage. The one time I'd opened the garage doors and peeked in, I'd seen it packed full of boxes and junk that came right up to the entrance. The next moment I was wrestling with an Ordnance Survey map about the same size as me and with a mind of its own, until she showed me how to fold it down so that I was only looking at the relevant bit. "You can navigate."

I couldn't navigate to save my life but I now see that involving me this way, keeping me occupied, was her way of taking my mind off the actual drive and what we were doing. Gran had me navigate her – as if she didn't know the way perfectly well herself – to the suburbs of Esher.

"There's an A-Z in the glove compartment, dear," she said. "Could you get it out for me?"

Now she had me navigate to a small side road that led into a larger road, packed with rush-hour traffic crawling slowly to the far-off motorway. Gran came to the junction, indicating left, and I thought she would wait for a break in the traffic. Then she put her foot down, tyres screeched and she swung out into the traffic stream. Horns blared and the car behind us, a swish black Rover, flashed its lights angrily.

"Gra-an!" I protested. I had an ability to split the word into an indefinite number of syllables, depending on my degree of agitation.

"Oh, sorry, dear. I thought he was slowing down for us," she said. She reached out and for the first time I noticed that she had a kitchen timer mounted on her dashboard: one of those stopwatch types with a digital display that count down the time and beep at the end. It was set for 27 minutes. I shook my head, a mature ten-year-old exasperated at the vagueness of the senior generation, and settled back into my seat, fully expecting to become very familiar with the rear of the car in front of us over the next half hour or so.

It was getting away from us. I realized after a minute that Gran was actually moving slower than

this rush-hour crawl of traffic. I peeked at the speedometer. The needle pointed to just below 20.

"Gra-a-an!"

"Don't want to cause an accident, dear," she said, not taking her eyes off the road.

The next 26 minutes were hell on earth. The road ahead was wide open and empty: behind us there must have been a tailback all the way into London, and I could feel the hostility and hatred emanating from it and roasting the back of my head. And the few times there was enough space in the oncoming lane for a car behind to try and overtake us, Gran would speed up slightly so that overtaking wasn't possible.

At last, at long last, the kitchen timer pinged.

"Oh, good, just in time for tea," she said. She dropped a gear, speeded up to 50 and headed back home without once asking me for directions.



A couple of hours later I was sitting in one corner of the living room doing some homework (numbers fascinated me even then and I'd brought some stuff home from school) while Gran had the news on. After the national stories came the local stuff, which included a pile-up caused by some dickweed who had been doing 70 with one hand on the wheel and the other on his carphone, and had made the wrong choice as to which hand to free up so he could use the gear stick.

"The idiot," Gran said, not looking up from her knitting. She had a way of always speaking in the same tone of voice but somehow modulating it anywhere between warm gooey honey (which she used for me) and rock-hard ice (like now). "The idiot."

Neither of us looked at the picture on the mantelpiece. A man and a boy: my grandfather and my Uncle Edward, both dead before I was born thanks to a not dissimilar road-usage attitude from a not dissimilar individual.

Then there was the screeching of tyres outside on the driveway; the sound of a powerful engine throbbing into silence and a car door slamming.

"Speaking of whom, your father's here, dear," Gran said, still knitting and still in the same tone of voice. She and Dad had never seen eye to eye: his mobile phone had gone off during my Christening and he still hadn't forgiven her for throwing it in the font.

Yeah, Dad's here, I thought glumly. That showed me who had won the great Sorting Things Out contest back home.

The bell rang, and kept ringing.

"Go and let him in, dear."

Yes, Dad had definitely won. "Our Kev!" he shouted when he saw me, rubbing his hands together, grinning all over his face. The same look as when he'd made some extra big deal at work and was expecting Mum to come up with the conjugal goods by means of celebration. He was a big man – big physically, big in personality – and always left me feeling small, even for a boy of ten. "How's my man?" He threw a couple of mock punches that left me rubbing my shoulder resentfully and bulldozed past

me into the living room.

"Hello, Darren," Gran said, still not looking up from her knitting. His smile became more fixed.

"Hello, Margaret," he said. "Almost hit your car again. Why don't you put it in the garage?"

"No one else almost hits it, Darren. Maybe you're driving too fast. How was the motorway?"

"Eh? Oh. All right. Yeah, it was all right, for once. Doing over 90 all the way here."

"Oh, good."

"Right!" Dad was rubbing his hands together as he turned to me. "You ready to come back home, Kev?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Hey, you're allowed to smile," he said with a grin. Another mock punch, this time making me wince. "Well, get upstairs and get your things, then. What's that you've got there?"

"Sums."

"Sums?" He picked up the textbook and pulled a face. "Which of these circles has the same area as this square? Jesus H.! Don't make it easy, do they?"

"I've been stuck on that one for ages," I said.

"Well, get home and we'll look it up in *Encarta*."

"I don't want to look it up," I said, "I want to work it out."

"Numbers are for nerds," he said. It was bad enough for him that his only child wore glasses. He was still smiling but there was a warning in his eyes too. "Numbers are for the little people in Computing, not Management like my Kev's going to be. You'll have your own people to worry about numbers –"

Dad had built up his business from nothing. And never let anyone forget it.

"What's the area of a circle, Kevin?" Gran said. She had yet to look up. Then she chanted the little rhyme she'd taught me. "If you want a hole repaired, use the formula –"

"Pi-r-squared," I said.

"And what's the area of a square?"

Easy. "One side, squared."

"So, they're both something squared, aren't they?"

After a moment, light dawned. "Right!" I grabbed my ruler – but Dad was still holding the book and he wasn't going to let it go. "Upstairs, get your things, now," he said.

"You see, dear, a lot of things are defined by numbers," Gran said. "Some simple, some more complicated, if you just take the trouble to learn them. If you've got the brains to learn them. If it occurs to you that they're worth learning."

"Now," Dad said quietly, and he propelled me out of the room with a hand in the small of my back.



When we got home, more to get me out of the way than to make me clean I was sent upstairs to have a bath before bedtime. I had a towel round my waist as I turned the taps on, and then I leapt out onto the landing in one surprised bound as a vibration like a concrete mixer rocked the bathroom.

"Dad!"

Dad appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"What is – oh, Christ." He came up the stairs two at a time and went into the bathroom, where he turned on the hot tap at the basin. The noise subsided.

"What was that?"

"Just a waterhammer, Kev. Started while you were away."

"What's waterhammer?" I said. It sounded silly. Water was soft. It sloshed. It didn't hammer.

Dad looked annoyed but he could never bear to show ignorance in front of me.

"It's..." He gestured vaguely. "A small block in the pipes, Kev, means that not all the water gets through, and some of it flows back, and that knocks more back, and so you get water vibrating all around the pipes and that reminds me, Louise! I thought I told you to get the plumber?"

Blaming it on Mum had safely diverted the topic away from the scientific principles of fluid dynamics. My heart sank as Dad strode out to confront Mum.

"I was going to, dear, but –" she said.

"But, but, but," Dad shouted. "Christ on a bike, I have to do everything round here."

"I'll call him now –"

"No, I'll call him –"

"I can do it, Darren –"

"You'll just get it wrong, you silly cow –"

"Darren –"

Slap. There went the reconciliation.

A moment's quiet, and then I silently mouthed the inevitable mantra as Dad spoke it out loud.

"Now look what you made me do."



The professor was looking at me as if what he had said explained everything.

"You've mentioned your grandmother," I said, "and you've mentioned waterhammer, but..."

"It's not obvious?"

"Um, no," I confessed.

He raised his eyebrows, poured us both another coffee, and continued.

We were all going off to the Chessington World of Adventure in a proud display of what a normal family we were.

Mum and I had got used to the rhythm of Dad's driving on the M25. You sat still in a traffic jam until the car in front of you started to move, then you accelerated to cruising speed and abruptly braked as the car in front unaccountably continued to crawl. This had been going on for half an hour, punctuated by Dad's "Jesus fucking Christ" or some variation on the same theologically contentious theme every time he had to slow down.

Finally we began to move. Properly, smoothly, not lurching. The jam was ebbing; the traffic was getting up to all of 40 mph.

"Oh, now that pisses me off. That really pisses me off," Dad said, when we finally saw what had caused this par-

ticular blockage. An ambulance and police car were gathered around a crumpled car on the hard shoulder of the eastbound lane. We were heading west, and our own jam had been caused by nothing less than all the cars in front of us slowing down to have a gawp. "All those fucking vultures eyeballing the wreck and they cause a jam behind them and they don't fucking care."

He slammed his foot down and the car shot forward again, this time almost making 70 before the brakes came on once more and Dad was flashing his lights at the car ahead. "Move!" he bellowed.

"He's going as fast as he can, Darren," Mum said, which was the bravest thing she'd said all day.

"He's going as fast as he can," Dad mimicked. "Christ, you sound like your mother. Hear that, Kev? When you get a girl, check out her mum first 'cos that's who she's going to turn into."

I wasn't listening. Something had clicked in my mind: the thought of all those cars ahead of us slowing down, which meant we had to slow down, which meant the ones behind us had to slow down... One small effect ahead sending forces of action and reaction rippling up and down the lines of traffic, magnifying as it went, flowing back down the motorway and trickling out at the junctions and up onto the side roads. A light tap on the brakes at the right place in the right time and you could surely bring the motorway system to a halt. Or speed it up again.

I was seeing the world in a whole new way. I'd never heard of transient pressure propagation or boundary conditions of a system, but I was picturing them as clear as day. Numbers. Like Gran said, defined by numbers. I was dazzled.

"Waterhammer," I murmured.

"Oh, Jesus, the boy's off again," Dad said. "Dreaming – Look out, you moron! Christ almighty, put some people behind a wheel..."



"So," I said, "your grandmother put the idea of numbers affecting the real world into your head?"

"Check."

"And the traffic jam made you see how it could work?"

"Check," he said again. "Numbers, in the form of fluid dynamics. I mean, I was only 10 so I can't say it all fell into place there and then, but I realize it was a defining moment. A light on the road to... well, Chessington."

So that was it. The explanation of "To Gran" was a bit of an anti-climax, but it had been a long shot. My journalist's instincts weren't always right.

"Well, thank you –" I started to say.

"There's more," he said. "I mean, it's all very well using the principles of waterhammer in a system but how do you get the system hammering in the first place?"



A month later I was back with Gran again and this time

it was for keeps. I'd missed out on the details of what started it: I was getting good at simply filtering out the raised voices as the ultimatum du jour from Mum collapsed. So it was quite a surprise when a weeping Mum burst into my room, yanked me from the computer and dragged me out to the car. Dad had already gone off on his post-eruption trip to the pub so she was able to get me out of the house without obstruction.

Dad turned up at Gran's soon after us. He did his usual trick of not taking his finger off the door bell until he got an answer.

Gran went out to open the door and I heard the voices in the hall.

"My wife here, Margaret?"

"My daughter and grandson are, here, Darren, yes."

"Right."

The door to the living room flew open and Dad stood there, glaring at Mum in her chair in the corner.

"You stupid cow, you don't go off without telling me!"

"And what stupid cow would that be, Darren?" said a mild voice behind him. He didn't look round.

"Look," he said, "all I said was –"

"Darren," said the voice again, "my daughter has come to visit me and you will kindly not block me out of my own living room in my own home."

Dad subsided. Slightly. He stood to one side to let Gran come into the room, and bowed a fraction of an inch.

"Margaret," he said with forced courtesy, "may I speak to my wife in private?"

Gran held his gaze for a moment, then shrugged. "If you will." She took Mum's hand gently. "Darren wants to talk to you, dear," she said quietly. "Come into the hall, and don't worry, I'll be right here in the next room. Be brave."

Mum went out like a sheep to the slaughter and Dad shut the door behind them. Raised voices started coming through the wall almost at once, and Gran put her arms round me and held me tight.

The voices were getting louder, until:

"You're not fucking leaving me, you're my wife!" Dad shouted.

"Darren –" Mum said.

"You're coming home now!"

"I'm staying, Dar –"

Slap. And that was when Gran made her move. She let go of me and slowly, deliberately went back out into the hall. Mum's quiet weeping got louder as she opened the door.

"Now look what you made me do!"

"Look what you made me do," Gran said quietly. "The cry of pathetic bullies who've run out of excuses."

"Margaret, if I'm not taking my wife –"

"My daughter," Gran said.

"– then I'm taking my son."

"My daughter's staying here," Gran said, "and so is Kevin. The poor dear deserves better than you."

"Oh, right." I found the courage to peek round the door. Dad was towering over Gran, standing six inches away so that he looked right down at her, and she wasn't in the least fazed. "Let's see what the courts say, eh? A prozac addict and an old lady looking after a ten-year-old boy."

"Courts side with the mother," Gran said, "Not with my lawyers, Margaret." Then Dad saw me. "At last, someone who isn't snivelling and whining. C'mere, Kev. I'm taking you home."

I was rooted to the spot.

Dad's smile fixed. "Come here, Kevin."

My mouth moved.

"What's that? Speak up."

"You hit Mum," I whispered. Mum herself was leaning against the wall, still sobbing, and hadn't joined in the conversation since the slap.

"My hand slipped, didn't it? Come on, Kev!" He engaged wheedle mode. "Look, I'll get tickets for Wembley and we'll —"

It took several tries but I managed to say it. "I'm staying here."

For the first time, Dad was surprised. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped, and he took a step forward.

"You are coming with me whether you —"

Gran had also moved a step and was blocking him. The only way he could physically reach me was to push her aside, and they were both doing mental computations as to what the courts would say to a father in a custody case who beats his wife and manhandles little old ladies.

Dad ceded loss of the battle, if not the war. He took a step back.

"I'm getting Kevin," he said quietly, "and neither of you cows are going to stop me."

He left, slamming the door behind him. Then the thud of the car door, the revving of the engine, the screeching of tyres and the sound of the car fading away.

"Take your mother upstairs, dear," Gran said to me. "This is an emergency and I've got phone calls to make."

Mum was lying in bed, prozaced to a higher plane of existence, and I was sitting by her side, stroking her hand and trying hard not to cry. Because Dad hated "little boys that blubbed." Funny, the way we can still want the respect of people we can come to loathe.

Gran appeared in the doorway. "Is Mummy sleeping?"

"Yes," I said.

Gran sighed. "Well, I can't leave you here with her. If we get burgled she'll never wake up anyway. Come with me."

She led me downstairs and into the hall, and over to a tall bookcase on the far wall. She reached up and touched a book on the top shelf, beyond my reach. The bookshelf moved aside to reveal a doorway.

I gasped and Gran smiled.

"It's just the garage, dear."



Picture this: sleek, low lines of polished black metal; a turbine whining into action; fins; gull-wing doors hissing slowly open...

That wasn't what it looked like at all but it's how I like to remember it. In fact, the car that faced the doors was a Morris Minor. Between it and the doors

was the thin screen of junk that faced anyone opening the doors from outside, as I had once done. The "junk" was like a stage set — a veil of boxes and nothing more.

I gazed around while Gran opened the passenger door for me. At the back of the garage was a truly awesome computer bank, monitors glowing with mapped-out road routes and columns of figures scrolling slowly past.

Gran followed my gaze. "It links to the Highways Agency's mainframe, dear," she said. "I'll explain everything, but for now, get in and remember your seatbelt."

We got in and I strapped myself in securely. Gran pressed a button on the dashboard which made the junk screen slide to one side and the garage doors swing open. The car lunged forward, swerved around her Mini parked outside and sped out into the night.



Now isn't the time, but if you've ever wondered what it would be like to drive a turbo-charged Morris Minor, I'm the man to tell you. And the surprises weren't over yet.

"Open the glove compartment, please, dear," Gran said. I tugged on the little door, and yelped in surprise when a small computer console slid out and a screen popped up. Another glowing road network, with two blobs clearly marked.

"We're the white blob, your father is the red one," she said. "I thought this day might come so I took the liberty of bugging his car a couple of weeks back."

I gaped at her.

"When he left us he stopped off at a pub, so we should be able to catch him up. My colleagues have been keeping him within range."

A cluster of other white blobs appeared, each with a number attached to it.

"Oh, good. The others are online," Gran said. She unhitched a microphone from under the steering wheel. "WH7 to all patrols, target is making for the M25. Essential that he be routed onto a B-road. WH Central, please provide instructions..."

After a moment another voice spoke. It was another old lady's voice but it spoke like a police dispatcher off *The Bill*. "WH3, take B2219 into Banstead, maintain patrol speed. WH12, make best speed to Epsom and await instructions. WH7, make best pursuit and good luck."

The other WH numbers radioed in their compliance. Old ladies, and old men too: the kind of voice that said *I Wear A Hat In My Car*.

"Give 'em what for, eh, Mags?" one man's voice boomed.

Gran held her radio up to her mouth. "This is WH7. Acknowledged, WH Central, and thank you. And thank you, George."

"You're welcome, Marg — WH7."

Gran hung up and pressed another button on the dash, and a police siren blared out. I wriggled round to look behind us and only then realized the noise was coming from our own car.

"Gran —" I said.

"Don't worry," she said.

"The police –"

"– will check their computer and see that it says another car is on the case. They won't interfere. Now, let Gran concentrate, dear."

We hurtled through darkest Surrey, through red lights and the wrong way round roundabouts; flashing at slower drivers until they were forced to pull over and let us by (and what I wouldn't have given to see their faces when they saw what it was that was overtaking them); always closing the gap that lay between the hunter and its prey. The drama playing itself out on the computer display was fascinating: Dad's red blob in the middle and the circle that was WH's 3, 8, 9, 12, 16, 18 and 19 tightening around it. And us, WH7, now so close that our blobs were almost touching.

The man's voice came over the radio again. "Soon have him, Maggie, eh what?"

Was it my imagination or was Gran's voice slightly softer when she answered?

"I think so, George, yes."

"What you doing later, Mags? How about dinner for two, candles and a chance to show these young 'uns that the old generation can still –"

"George! I mean, WH16, this is an open channel and... others are listening."

"Let 'em!" the old codger declared. "Who cares –"

"Including children," Gran said firmly.

WH Central spared Gran's further blushes by ordering all cars to maintain silence unless reporting on progress.

Gran turned the siren off and a few minutes later Dad's BMW hove into view ahead of us. I recognized the licence plate.

"He's got to take the next left," Gran muttered. "It will be very inconvenient if he doesn't."

Dad was showing no sign of slowing down or indicating, though since he rarely did either at the best of times it was impossible to guess his intentions. And then we came round a bend and I saw two cars ahead of him, driving abreast and blocking the road: a half-timber Morris Traveller and a Hillman Avenger. Dad braked sharply and I could almost hear the "Christ almighty" and imagine him thumping the steering wheel. But there was no getting round the two cars and Dad wasn't a man to suffer that kind of speed, so he swerved into the next left turning.

Gran thumped her own wheel. "Yes!" she said. She unhooked the microphone again. "Thank you, WH9, WH16. Target is mine: am proceeding alone."

"Good luck, Ma – WH7. WH16 out and, ahem, see you later, eh?" said George.

"Oh, really, that man," Gran murmured as she hung up the microphone again, but something told me she was pleased.

Our two cars were alone on the road now. Gran revved up towards the BMW I looked at Dad's approaching car with horror: I'd watched too much James Bond: who knew what else this Morris marvel had under its bonnet? Machine guns, missiles, lasers –

"Don't kill him, Gran!" I blurted.

Gran said nothing. Did the car speed up slightly?

"Gran!" I grabbed at the wheel but I couldn't move it.

"Don't be silly, dear," Gran said. "Brace yourself."

We rammed the back of the car and I felt the belt tighten across me and hold me firmly in my seat. Then, as Dad began to slow, Gran pulled back and accelerated to overtake. I had a brief glimpse of my father's staring face before the Morris slammed into the side of the BMW. And this time there was no rebound: Gran held the wheel over, forcing Dad off the road. He hit the pavement, winged the car on a lamp-post and ploughed into the bank.

"Stay here, dear," Gran said as the car screeched to a halt. She pulled out a bag from beneath her seat and I twisted round in my seat to watch the confrontation as she strode towards the wrecked vehicle. Dad's door opened and he got out, staggering but still intact.

"You fucking lunatic!" he bellowed. "What the fucking hell are you doing? You'll be hearing from –"

He stopped, peered forward. "Margaret?"

Gran was fishing about in the bag. She found something and held it out towards him. Dad crumpled at the knees and fell face forward on the ground.

I screamed. "Dad!" I knew it. Gran had killed him. I tore out of the car and over to where she was crouching over the body. I flung myself at her, sobbing, and tried to haul her off. "Get off him, get off him –"

"He's all right, darling!" Gran said. "Look. Help me roll him over."

I did and saw to my amazement that he was breathing, his eyes were flickering and there was no blood anywhere. Gran held a small aerosol in front of my eyes for my inspection.

"Knockout gas," she said. "He'll only be out for a couple of minutes. You didn't think I'd make my daughter a widow, did you?"

She opened the bag again and started to lay things out on the ground with swift precision. A bottle of clear liquid. A tube. An empty whisky bottle. For the first time I noticed she was wearing gloves.

"Though I admit," she added as she attached one end of the tube to the end of the first bottle, "it's a tempting thought. Hold this for me, will you?"

She gave me the bottle of liquid. The other end of the tube went into Dad's mouth.

"Gran!"

She winked as she rose to her feet. "I'm not asking you to poison your father, dear. It'll just solve a little problem and leave him none the worse for wear."

She took Dad's right hand and wrapped his fingers round the empty whisky bottle, then touched the neck of the bottle to his mouth. She turned towards Dad's car and I let my bottle, the full one, drop slightly.

"Kevin!" she said without turning round. I quickly lifted it back to its former level and watched as she tucked the whisky bottle under the driver's seat. Then she came back to me, plucked the tube from Dad's mouth and relieved me of the clear stuff. "Let him try to pass a breathalyser test with this little lot inside him!" she said. She packed everything away into her bag and stood up, ticking points off on her fingers.

"Breath... bottle... fingerprints... saliva..." She turned to me and beamed. "I think we've done everything, dear,

and I don't think the divorce court will be very sympathetic after this little event. Least of all when he starts raving to the police about being forced off the road and knocked out by his mother-in-law. Oh, that reminds me, we'd better call them —"

Then she stopped, head cocked to one side. We could hear police sirens. Real ones. "Quicker off the mark than I thought, dear," she said. "We'd better be off. Get back in the car, now."

She paused briefly to feel under the BMW's bumper. When she came up to me she handed me a small metal and plastic disc. "A souvenir, dear," she said.

I finally, finally found the strength and the breath to say something.

Originally enough, it was, "Gran —"

The sirens really were close. She put a firm hand on my shoulder "Come on, dear, we don't want to get involved. I don't believe in telling lies to policemen."



The professor stopped abruptly, looking thoughtful.

"You're making it up," I said, when it became obvious he wasn't going to say anything else.

He grinned.

"I mean," I said, "you're telling me your grandmother and her friends were using the waterhammer effect to keep the motorways clear?"

"Clear?" the professor exclaimed. "If you'd ever driven on a motorway in the 1990s you wouldn't ask that. No, quite the opposite. They were deliberately keeping the motorways, or at least the M25, clogged up with the traffic that would otherwise have driven through their peaceful little villages. They lived in idyllic havens and wanted to keep it that way... of course, if you've lost your husband and son to fast drivers then holding up the boy racers would be its own reward anyway. There might have been spin-off organizations doing the same thing elsewhere in the country, but I think Gran's people were the originals.

"Remember, even back in the 90s, and earlier, authorities were already applying fluid dynamics to traffic theory. That was how traffic lights were run, for instance. But Gran and her friends took it that extra bit further. They knew it just takes a little action here and there to send shockwaves all around the system, and if you use a powerful enough computer and the right chaotic algorithms to plan your moves, you can use those shockwaves to clear the roads, or to block them. That's what that little traffic-calming cruise of hers was all about."

"But —"

"And then came the personal flyer," he added, "and the cars all but vanished from our roads, so of course it's not a problem any more. Not for those of us who still drive everywhere, anyway."

I was trying to spot a flaw in what he'd said. Any logical catch.

"Where did they get their money from?" I said. "That equipment must have cost."

"Life savings. They weren't rich but they weren't

exactly poor either." He looked at his watch. "Well, it's been unexpectedly pleasant but time is pressing. Are you flying back?"

"Of course," I said.

"Good luck."



I sat in the cockpit of my flyer, waiting for permission to join the main southbound airstream at 500 feet. It was jammed solid up there.

A network of agents cruising the nation's highways, driving their cars in certain areas, at certain speeds, for certain times, all calculated by the big computer...

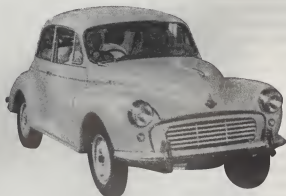
Ridiculous.

Of course, the kind of individual who thought the entire UK road network was laid out for his personal benefit wasn't going to be compliant. A traffic jam in one place would just make him drive faster elsewhere — maybe even through the villages they were trying to keep clear. Therefore, as well as the regulars there would have to be special operatives, with special equipment, acting against persistent offenders...

Still ridiculous.

I glanced in annoyance at my watch, then up at the airstream above me. It was packed solid with flyers and traffic clearance was a long time in coming. I could almost believe it was laid on for my own benefit.

Ben Jeapes has recently published his first novel, a fine fat tome called *His Majesty's Starship* (Scholastic Press, 1998). His last story in *Interzone* (his eighth in these pages) was "Winged Chariot" (issue 118). He lives in Abingdon, Oxfordshire.



His wife stands in the doorway, red-eyed. Her brother is there behind her, protective in the shadows.

Henry Claiborne turns away and stares at the muted TV, wishing they would just leave so he can make a start on the project.

"I just don't understand any more, Henry," she says. "You've got to get a grip!"

Henry smiles. She doesn't know about his project.

"Come on. Let's go," says his wife's brother, as he lifts her last case. "Goodbye Henry," says his wife.

The front door squeaks and slams shut. Peace and quiet at last. Closing his eyes, Henry sits back in his reclining chair and savours the sense of relief that wells up and suffuses his whole body.

He will get a grip. He'll show them.

He flicks on the TV sound with the remote and the Red Arrows split in a shriek and he pushes the volume up high. With the stereo remote he turns the volume on that up as well, then surfs the cable channels with one hand and flicks from radio to CD to tape and back again with the other, relishing the random cacophony that fills the house.

The project. What to do first?

Start collecting some of the smaller units, laying them out so he can begin the ergonomic analysis, or just make a list of the tools he will need for the later stages? Or both?

He feels a tingle of excitement.

The first visit to the aircraft museum focused something in Henry that he had been only dimly aware of for some years: disappointment at how mundane his life had turned out to be, and uncertainty as to how to turn it around.

He'd gone under mild protest, but surprised himself by finding the variety of old aircraft strangely intriguing; the pointy supersonic Concorde, for instance, and the skulking, vulture-like B-52 with its eight jet engines and tiny wing-tip wheels. And as well as older historical objects such as the wartime Lancaster bomber that he recognized without even reading the information panels, the museum had a range of long-forgotten oddities that pricked Henry's imagination in ways he had not expected: the little propeller biplane Dragon Rapide air-liner redolent of take-offs at sun-

rise in the Empire between the wars, and the swept-wing Victor V-bomber of the atomic Dan Dare 1950s seeming to point the way to the same lost future that Henry felt he had mislaid. Now mostly metal and rivets and rubber locked to the ground like weird sculptures, it was hard to believe these museum pieces were flying 30 or 60 years ago.

Most wonderful of all was the swooping, aerobatic Supermarine Spitfire which really could still fly, its propeller a halo of spun gold as it carved turns against the sunset with its trademark longbow wings, the noise of its throaty Merlin engine clearly conjuring up for several of the audience a bittersweet memory of the summer of 1940. The announcer declared that the Spitfire was one of the most beautiful aeroplanes ever designed, and Henry had to agree; she looked like a whippy, one-man thoroughbred, the ultimate man-machine symbiosis.

Was this the vocation he had missed? To be able to fly like that you must surely have to live in the moment, focusing animal awareness on the task of feeling out the air currents like an eagle, reading the sky uncluttered by the junk of daily earthbound stress.

Get a grip, she says. OK, I'm doing it. I'm starting now.

He turns his recliner to face the patio doors and the view out to the rolling fields and the puffy clouds marching westwards across the sky. He pushes the sofa and the other armchairs out of the sitting room, along with the coffee table and everything else irrelevant, leaving a big enough space in which to work.

He goes round the house, collecting up any easily portable appropriate objects. The radio, and the alarm radio for that matter. The computer, monitor and keyboard. And the printer. The video camera, and the still camera; and the video sound mixer he'd bought cheap and never used. Let's get it out and use it! The microwave. The iron, of course. Any calculators in the

house. Both phones. His watch, and any other clocks and timers.

He brings them all into the sitting room and starts laying them down around the sitting room wall, next to the TV and stereo.

In the weeks after visiting the aircraft museum, Henry found himself looking up at every plane that flew overhead, whether a light Cessna pottering around Luton or some FedEx trijet letting down into Stansted. Initially frus-



The little
propeller
airplane
Dragon
Rapide...

Vanguard

Nicholas Waller

trated at being unable to identify the types he saw, he bought several books and in them found Amy Johnson, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Brian Trubshaw, Chuck Yeager, Yuri Gagarin. He started watching flight documentaries on the Discovery Channel, marvelling at the jagged boomerang of the B-2 Stealth bomber, the fragility of the original Wright biplane and the barmy wonder of the nine-wing Capronisimo luxury flying houseboat from 1921 that encapsulated the aspirations of an age while simultaneously contriving to be one of the world's worst-ever aircraft.

He bought plastic models and spent hours exploring their structure in miniature, hoping to find the key to their essence in some commonality of design. And he found that his waking hours were increasingly preoccupied with powerful images of flying, the ground barely distinguishable below as he banked across the cloudscapes and pitched up to arc across the sun. A half-seen silvery glint in the air was enough to send him into a reverie of freedom, projecting his mind and soul into the sliding currents of the atmosphere, the wind fierce in his hair and the tears running from his squinting eyes, riding the turbulence in his open-cockpit Tiger Moth like Saint-Exupery finding suddenly he had slipped beyond the confines of this world.

His subconscious was clearly trying to tell him something.

In London to investigate flight displays in the Science Museum, he came across the Apollo 10 command module and wondered if this was the key. As he peered into the cramped interior, he found it hard to believe that the little cone had actually carried three men around the far side of the Moon. Maybe it was the seed of something new.

Henry contemplated staying in the museum after hours and clambering into the capsule to spend a night with the wax dummies of Stafford, Cernan and Young. Would he wake from sleep to find himself weightlessly circling the Moon with them, watching through one of those tiny windows as the lunar landscape rolled past below and the Earth rose lonely and distant into the eternal blackness of space?

There's other stuff, too, less portable. The dishwasher. The cooker... now, that's a challenge. The washing machine. Oh! The bathroom scales! Mustn't forget them. And then there's the light switches in every room, not to mention all the plug sockets, and the water system: taps, the mains, the gas boiler, the radiator thermostats. Gas and electric meters. Cable TV box. Fridge thermometer. Car dashboard. Rip it out!

On one day that had started not much differently from many others, Henry sat in his grey office in Hemel

staring out of the window at a high jumbo's pure contrail drifting westwards, far above the dull rooftops of the industrial park. Amazing that some jumbos were in the air more than they were on the ground. "I wonder if the passengers realize what they're doing." He closed one eye. "Building the foundations of the future..."

There was a knock as the door opened and Stefan Pierson came in, carrying a printout. "Henry?" he said, calm but wary, noticing Henry's phone off the hook, "what's going on?" He put the printout on the desk. "Lizzie Bryson said you'd have BP3 revised. It's been a month, but what do I see? no change, and I have to get the figures to the States this afternoon!"

Henry glanced at the spreadsheets. A grid of numbers, purporting to predict sales in all territories for the next 15 months. But how could anyone really tell? It was meaningless, an attempt to claim the future by imposing spurious form on it.

"Stefan," said Henry, scrawling a signature across the numbers anyway, "don't you just dream of flying away sometimes?"

Stefan pursed his lips, thoughtful. "Umm... Lizzie also said you were talking about flying a lot. Daydreams."

Henry looked up at Stefan, eyebrows raised. "It's more than that; it's a gateway to something I can't see yet."

"We're..." Stefan hesitated. "Henry, do you think you need some kind of break?"

"What?"

"This is a cry for escape?"

Henry laughed. "Maybe! But it's a bit obvious. I think I'm on the verge of something new." He waved his arm vaguely, indicating the office cubicles and the business park generally. "Suppose this is a reaction to the scheduled, mass-produced way we live and work and shop now?"

"What's wrong with it? We've all got targets. We get incentivized to exceed them. We get to go home at nights."

"But what about the long term view? I think I'm somehow tapping into a future where humanity lives off-world, flying continuously weightless in a three-dimensional environment, as our ancestors lived in the oceans. This two-dimensional land existence must be just a blip on our upward path..."

Stefan closed his eyes. "You've not been taking any hallucinogens have you?"

"What?"

"For fuck's sake, Henry, you're a regional sales manager in a publishing company! What the hell are you talking about?"

Henry could feel himself blushing. "Something more of us should be doing - mapping the future. And a damn sight more usefully than your five-year corporate strategies."

"Henry. You're letting me down."

"What's that supposed to mean?"



Stefan looked at Henry's untidy desk, and his e-mail flag blinking, and the unrevised BP3 spreadsheets. He sighed. "You need to make things happen, Henry. Now. It's about being proactive, taking control. Not escaping over the horizon."

"I'm a middle manager in a bureaucratic corporation." Henry pointed angrily at the spreadsheet. "What kind of control is that? Now, these pilots I've been researching, John Glenn and the others, they're taking the human race to a higher level; the kind of people H.G. Wells says have the right stuff to rule the world!"

Stefan laughed. "Because they fly untrammelled, and look down on us who noodle along in offices pushing paper around?"

Henry nodded warily. "There's something spiritual about flight that's the key to our next stage –"

"Slipping the surly bonds of earth, to touch the face of God?"

"Yes! – exactly!"

"Well, go hang-gliding then!"

"You're not taking me seriously..."

"OK. On your terms. Your pilots:

think, man! It's not the 20s and 30s! They're part of a closely regulated industrial complex. You've been on airline flights – it's a competitive service business delivering a value-added transportation product! And dull men in suits like you are in charge of it, making budget projections –"

Henry stood up. "You're wrong!"

"No! Pilots are white collar workers! Middle management administrators of an integrated technical system!"

Henry picked up his jacket and walked out of his office as Stefan stood up and shouted after him: "Even the military! It's not scarf-and-goggles types punching a Hurricane into the wide blue yonder any more!"

All this will take a lot of wiring. And more plugs and power points. More things for the list. Wood: two by four, and one by one, and plywood. Some glass. Some new tools, too. Nothing but the best! A jigsaw, screws, hammer, drill. And copper tubing. And bricks and mortar. Welding equipment. Soldering equipment. Sketch a design, and then I'll know better what I need. This is fun!

At the Three Horseshoes Henry sat out by the canal, nursing pint after pint and thinking that there was something in what Stefan said. The pub itself was at a transport nexus where several strata of the industrial archaeology of motion could be seen from where he sat. Here was the old Grand Union canal, barges drifting among the ducklings at four miles an hour, while a couple of hundred yards behind the occasional train thundered past on the mainline rail from London to Birmingham and beyond, whipping up a corridor of wind. And above, at the pinnacle of the transport network, silently massive Boeings and Airbuses wheeled in stacked circles like enormous gulls, waiting for

clearance to descend into Heathrow after flights from Munich and Kuala Lumpur and Seattle and Baku.

All this was going on every day, all the time, routinely, repetitively, organized, controlled, automated. As Stefan had indicated, modern pilots were not adventurers fighting the night flight mail through cracked-tooth Andean passes in thunderstorms, they were cogs in a vast transport machine that practically ran itself, travelling routes they were allotted far above the weather, obeying air traffic control and constrained by accountants who pored over load factor reports. Flying? No, just a dehumanized business operation shuffling units around like any other. Plug in the guidance data and the jumbo could get to Bangkok by itself, its so-called pilot second-guessed by fly-by-wire systems and global positioning satellites.

Maybe events had taken a wrong turn and the era of the Tiger Moth was dead, but Henry suspected it was not yet time for humanity to give up everything to automation.

He's got a new security system, with CCTV and intercom on the front gate and lots of nice shiny switches to operate it. And instrumentation for the greenhouse windows. It's getting there. He has plans, not just a plan for plans. He has the tubes and the cables and the hammers and nails. He knows where things will go and how he is building it. He's maintaining visibility, he knows he can reach everything. It's all tickety-boo, it floats his boat.

Henry felt it unnecessary to go back into the office. He reduced extraneous personal clutter and ramped up his programme of research, to get himself into a position where he could see clearly how to take the next step forward.

The journey took him back to the aircraft museum, still uncertain what he was looking for but sure he would find it eventually, buried somewhere in the design assumptions of the grounded aircraft dispersed around the airfield as if waiting for the call to scramble one last time.

Wandering past the chubby Sunderland flying boat and the shell of the cancelled TSR-2, Henry found himself inexorably drawn to the elegant Vickers VC10, the high-T tailplane, rear-engined British airliner from the optimistic 1960s. Undersold by comparison with the blocky 707 and DC-8, it had long since been superseded; evolutionary design convergence had resulted in the indistinguishably dull high-bypass twin-jets that proliferated like rats in the modern air system. A commercial failure, the VC10 looked to Henry like a real aeroplane: the Spitfire of the airliner world.

That gave him an idea.

At the VC10 cockpit doorway he smiled. Through that aging, faintly scratched windshield the crew would once have looked down on the Alps, the Atlantic, the plains of Africa and the deserts of the Middle East.

...Inexorably drawn to the elegant Vickers VC10...

This was it, the old-fashioned complexity of a utilitarian, pre-computer flight deck, complete with a vast array of 800 or 900 controls and dials and buttons and knobs and switches and rockers and levers, all marked with cryptic, functional lettering. The control columns were well-used, polished by 20 or 30,000 landings and takeoffs. Henry took his time to let his gaze wander over the dusty instruments, dark now, that had once been the apex of flight technology: the needled dials that showed the engine states, the electrical buses and circuit breakers, the trim wheel, the R/T panel, the de-icers, the engine fire extinguishers, the PA phone, rudder pedals, the weather radar, flap controls, and the shiny-topped throttle levers that had been thrust forward and back and forward and back in Cairo and Johannesburg and New York and London and Bombay and Sydney and Singapore.

This was all concrete, protuberant, mechanical, tactile engineering with switches that clicked, a solid gun-metal grey environment that a real person could interact with and understand, not some ghastly modern virtual cockpit of beige carpeting, fly-by-wire hand controllers, autoland and VDU screens providing a flickering, flaky cyberglimpse of the plane's conception of the real world.

This really was it. The VC10 was at the turning point, its heyday at a time when men were going to the Moon and looking forward to the stars, but built when people who'd trained in open cockpits still had to use physical force to push those controls around. It was the link between low-flying, cold and unreliable prop planes of the early days and modern mass-produced airliners that everyone pretended was not a travelling aeroplane at all but some sort of waiting room, a restaurant, a cinema, a place to rest after going shopping in the glittering retail departure mall.

He was keen to start exploring his own prototype, to put himself on the first steps to building the skills necessary to navigate the turbulent currents of futurity.

Get a grip, get a grip! Put your hands on the levers of power. Step by step and line by line, suck that puppy and make it shine! Brick by brick, set goals for success and achieve, make things happen, build the future, hit your targets! Turn that tap, punch that key. Take charge! Be aggressive, look forward, and set the controls for the heart of the sun!

Henry Claiborne's wife is increasingly worried that no-one has seen or heard of Henry for several days and decides one bright morning to go back to the house. She can hear music blasting out loud over the radio even as she parks in the driveway.

As she pushes open

the sitting-room door she is surprised to find the room transformed. A complete mess of plywood offcuts and piles of cement and tools and wires surrounds a wood-and-brick building not much smaller than the sitting-room itself, hulking like a misshapen spider amongst a web of what seems like hundreds of stretched power cables and copper pipes shining in the sunlight.

Her first inclination is to ring her brother, but she can't see the phone. She reaches for a light switch, but finds that it has been removed, wire running from it to join others heading into the back of the shed. Looking round more carefully, she realizes that every light switch she can see has been adapted, and every central heating radiator has been replumbed, the valve and thermostat controls removed and new copper pipe welded and snaking into small entry ports built into the new brickwork.

Warily stepping through the web, she moves closer. There is a wooden hatchway on the left hand side of the structure, so she gingerly pulls it open.

And there on his recliner lies Henry, surrounded by empty Chinese cartons and every last conceivable control, monitor, switch, button, keyboard, dial, valve and tap you can find in the work or domestic environment, re-engineered to be easily accessible from his command chair. The electricity meter is whirring round patiently, the tape deck and CD and tuner/amp lights blinking as the music plays, the TV is on but showing only static, the computer monitor displays a screensaver of gulping fish. The two telephones are easily to hand; all the sink and basin and bath taps are plumbed into one overhead panel; there's the speedometer from the car; radiator thermostats are clustered on the right, next to the house light switches and the security camera apparatus; remote TV controls fixed into handy units on either side of the main seat; the gas meter, all the electric plug sockets, the barometer, greenhouse thermometer and car altimeter and the fusebox and bathroom scales and all the door handles in the house; and the cooker and microwave and kitchen implement controls, ripped from their proper locations, are fixed into a panel across the front of the cockpit, just under the glued-in car windshield.

And Henry. He's smiling, clutching the car steering wheel, staring out through the windshield, out through the patio doors to the scudding clouds and beyond, into the light of the morning sun.

Nicholas Waller wrote

"The Travel Agent" (IZ 130) and "Frame by Frame" (IZ 138). His father, he tells us, was an RAF man who became an airline pilot in the post-World War II years. Some of that seems to have rubbed off.

the skulking, vulture-like 52.

The Nine Billion Names of Fantasy...

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy, edited by John Clute and John Grant, has won several awards, and at the recent Eaton Conference on Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature I had the privilege of accepting one of them – the Eaton Award, honouring the outstanding critical work on science fiction or fantasy published in 1997 and 1998. Before reading an acceptance speech from Clute and Grant, I remarked that I might properly claim a few splinters from the plaque myself, in recognition of my small contributions to the volume as a Consultant Editor.

Even since the book appeared with a title page listing four Contributing Editors and two Consultant Editors, everyone has surely wondered, “Exactly what does a Consultant Editor do?” While I can’t say how David Hartwell earned his billing, I might summarize my role by stating, unilluminatingly, that a Consultant Editor sits around and waits to be consulted. Yet, to satisfy a waiting world’s desperate curiosity, I can be somewhat more specific about how I affected – or tried to affect – the final product.

In the beginning, years ago, I spent a considerable amount of time, along with several others, going through a massive computer file, entitled (for some reason) “EXP.TRE,” that listed all proposed topical entries in the volume. Each reader was asked to add her own comments about issues to raise, or important works to mention, in the entry; this would presumably be helpful to those assigned to write the entries. So, under ACHILLES, I noted the interesting appearance of Achilles in Dave Duncan’s *A Rose-Red City*, and under BOOKS, I described the talking book that uniquely functioned as the villain in *The Care Bears Movie*. Other comments similarly ranged from the useful to the moronic; under RINGS, for instance, someone felt the need to mention J.R.R. Tolkien...

Three times, I recall, I received this file, made additions, and returned it to Clute. However, reading the volume, I discern no evidence that any contributors actually consulted this file before writing their entries. My theory is that the vaunted EXP.TRE file was basically busywork, provided for the people besieging the editors with eager offers to help, giving them something to do while Clute, Grant and the Contributing Editors did the real work of preparing the volume.

My other “small contributions”? I later received from Clute some draft entries to review, edited or reworked a few of them, and wrote eleven entries on my own. After the book was published, I

read through the entire text, line by line, and produced a massive compilation of notes ranging from spelling and punctuation errors to impassioned complaints about omitted, superfluous or misguided entries; some of this material, edited and toned down, will appear, along with other people’s comments and corrections, as an addendum to the forthcoming paperback edition. But my greatest, and most fruitless, energies were devoted to correspondence with Clute about the overall theory and methodology of the volume.

Before *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* materialized, Clute had already spoken about his proposed “model of fantasy” that would serve as the book’s foundation. In this fundamental sentence of fantasy narrative, an idyllic world is first disturbed by a sense of Wrongness, corresponding to supernatural fiction; then, wrongness erupts into the widespread devastation of Thinning, corresponding to horror; finally, the evil is dispelled and the world proceeds to Healing, corresponding to pastoral literature. While I thought “Thinning” a poor choice of words, I liked the model, but found it crucially incomplete.

That is, in fantasy, evil is not defeated rapidly and effortlessly, leading immediately to Healing; such quick reversals are more characteristic of horror, where youthful protagonists may at the last minute fortuitously stumble upon just the right talisman or magic formula that disintegrates the vampire or sends the demons back to Hell. For a fantasy hero, more work is involved. After the hero has educated and improved himself to the point when he is ready to confront the opponent, there typically follows a long and sustained struggle which, I maintained, constituted the third narrative stage of Agon, or Contest, in the master narrative of fantasy. In this grand confrontation, both hero and villain have become so powerful that they may seem possessed by, or infused with the spirit of, powers greater than themselves; thus, this stage evokes a correspondence with myth. Only after this epic battle, when the evil is destroyed and the hero reverts to humble ordinariness, does a spirit of pastoral Healing prevail.

I laboured to persuade Clute to add this fourth stage to his model, which I

had grown fond of. It would neatly express the key difference between fantasy, which includes this stage, and horror, which lacks it. It would provide the model with evocative seasonal imagery – Wrongness, autumn; Thinning, winter; Contest, spring; Healing, summer – and effectively resonate with, without duplicating, the master narrative of Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (one intriguing divergence: Frye’s monomyth begins in spring, but fantasy begins in autumn). And it would elevate fantasy above other forms of fantastic literature – supernatural fiction, horror, myth, pastoral – as the one grand narrative that incorporated and harmonized them all (with science fiction intriguingly positioned as one significant effort to contradict or challenge the pattern, but that’s a story for another day).

Yet Clute seemed sceptical. He once floated a sort of three-part/five-part model – his three stages, with two transitional phases between Wrongness and Thinning and between Thinning and Healing – but as I tactfully noted, this only made matters worse. Although something first called Knot, and later renamed Recognition, was finally presented as a key “moment” between Thinning and Healing, it never emerged as the complete fourth stage I envisioned. While others certainly influenced his thinking, my objections may have been one reason why Clute presented the model in more muted tones than originally projected; in the volume, I was struck by the relative brevity of the entry on FANTASY explaining the model – two pages – especially when compared to other bloated monstrosities like Mike Ashley’s ten pages on ANTHOLOGIES, Grant’s eleven pages on TARZAN MOVIES, and everyone’s favourite bloated monstrosity, Hugh Davies’s 25-page list of OPERAS.

Still, my most vociferous complaints about the embryonic volume involved its occasional tendency to avoid using the English language.

In one early letter, Clute declared, with apparent excitement, that while planning the book, he and his colleagues had discovered there did not exist a suitable critical vocabulary to describe all aspects of fantasy; thus, the editors would have to unearth, or invent, the required terms. Looking through the EXP.TRE file, with numerous words and phrases unknown to me or anybody else, I became concerned. The English language, I argued, is naturally conservative; innumerable new words are proposed every year, but only a few are deemed truly necessary

Gary Westfahl

and an Encyclopedia of Other Concerns

and used often enough to enter the dictionary. If a word doesn't exist to describe a given phenomenon, the odds are excellent that it is simply because there is no need for a term.

Consider examples from science fiction: we all know stories in which aliens that look like human beings live on Earth as unobtrusive observers; but what is the *name* for such stories? What about people whose minds are taken over by evil aliens? What is the *name* for such possessed people? The answer is that there aren't any names for these things, because we don't need them; or on the rare occasions when the matters are discussed, a brief description is not troublesome. Yet *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* at times seemed engaged in an endless quest to identify virtually every possible feature in fantasy and provide it with a special name.

Although many proposed terms did not make the final cut (thank goodness!), possibly in response to my criticisms, enough of them did to occasionally result in obfuscation. In extreme cases, statements are little more than strings of neologisms: a RITE OF PASSAGE, its entry states, "may be undertaken by a CHILDE protagonist without benefit of counsel; or by a person who wanders INTO THE WOODS of a GODGAME from which s/he returns wiser, with gifts, and perhaps married; or by a figure who, in order to LEARN BETTER, must undertake a NIGHT JOURNEY..." To say the least, the rhetoric can be murky unless one has already mastered the vocabulary; if the purpose of encyclopedias is to communicate information, these outpourings of neologisms are manifestly counterproductive. Further, with the vast majority of the proposed coinages certain to be rejected, like the vast majority of coinages are always rejected, authors of such prose risk sounding foolish to posterity.

I'm not sure why crafting *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* came to involve so much creative vocabulary. In some cases, people may have sincerely believed they were devising urgently needed terms that would be ecstatically embraced by fantasy commentators, though I personally have not seen much evidence of that. In a few cases, people may have dreamed of securing a modicum of immortality by inventing a word that ended up in *The Oxford English Dictionary*; however, words do not enter the language accompanied by credits, and the people who invent successful words generally remain just as obscure as the people who don't. The most provocative theory would be that these terms were employed, consciously or subconsciously, in order to convey

contempt for the genre of fantasy.

Consider: if a person seeks to name and categorize every single possible element or aspect of fantasy, she implicitly asserts that fantasy narratives are not only governed by one underlying pattern but, in fact, are nothing more than mechanical assemblages of pre-fabricated elements. Do you want to write a fantasy? First, you choose an overall pattern: ANIMAL FANTASY, DYNASTIC FANTASY, URBAN FANTASY... Next, choose a protagonist: BRAVE LITTLE TAILOR, JACK, UGLY DUCKLING... Then choose a setting: ARCADIA, FOREST, LABYRINTH... And so on. Choose one from column A, one from column B, one from column C, put the pieces together, and you have a fantasy.

Could the distinguished editors of this encyclopedia actually entertain such a reductionist vision of fantasy literature? Yes, they do, but *only in some cases*, as Grant explains in his entry on GENRE FANTASY, where he says, "its main distinguishing characteristic is that, on being confronted by an unread GF book, one recognizes it... the territory into which the book takes one is familiar - it is FANTASYLAND. The characters, too, are likely to be familiar: HIDDEN MONARCHS, UGLY DUCKLINGS, DWARFS, ELVES, DRAGONS... In short, GF is not at heart fantasy at all, but a comforting revisitation of cosy venues." Thus, Grant agrees, innumerable texts published under the aegis of fantasy are indeed "mechanical assemblages of pre-fabricated elements"; yet his disdain for them doesn't matter, because such books are "not at heart fantasy at all." Here, the logic of the argument escapes me: on the one hand, the volume identifies things like "HIDDEN MONARCHS, UGLY DUCKLINGS, DWARFS, ELVES, [and] DRAGONS" as common elements of fantasy; on the other hand, if authors put these elements together with insufficient imagination and originality, the resulting stories are not really fantasies. To me, this represents wordplay of another, more dangerous sort, renaming and removing one what doesn't like in a genre in order to make it prettier.

Then, if one eliminates works of "genre fantasy" that are only iterative shufflings of a well-worn deck of cards, what about the remaining fresh and stimulating texts that Grant would endorse as *genuine* fantasy? *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* has a special name for the good ones too: INSTAURATION FANTASY - the coinage that is undoubtedly nearest and dearest to Clute's heart, and also the term that I, with characteristic charm and grace, ascribed with the greatest vehemence.

I dislike the term in part because I know something about the person who promulgated the term "instauration," Francis Bacon, and I know Clute is misappropriating the word (as he all but acknowledges); yet I also question whether this subgenre truly exists. To quickly simplify Clute's discussion (I'm already over my word limit - again!), an INSTAURATION FANTASY ends with not the restoration of the old order, but the birth of a distinctive new order. To convey the difference, he cites exemplary texts like John Crowley's *Little, Big*, Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, and Grant's *The World*. However, any fantasy written from a reasonably adult perspective for a reasonably adult audience will impart an understanding that the end can never be exactly like the beginning, that no realm ravaged by relentless evil can be perfectly restored to previous conditions, that building a new castle on the ruins of the old or placing a dead king's son on the throne cannot engender a future that will precisely replicate the past. Since any thoughtful fantasy will colour its concluding triumph with such recognition of irretrievable loss, any thoughtful fantasy might qualify as "instauration fantasy." The distinction Clute is making, then, is one of degree, not of kind: when the recognition of irretrievable loss is especially profound, and the ending aura of newness especially strong, one has an "instauration fantasy." The meaning of "instauration fantasy," then, is perilously close to "really good fantasy," so that vocabulary is again being deployed to segregate favoured texts from unfavoured texts. Indeed, since Clute's descriptions virtually preclude the possibility of there being a *really bad* "instauration fantasy," the term functions only as a novel way for Clute to salute the books he especially admires.

Within *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* - an extraordinary reference work, I should add, that I am proud to be associated with, despite my complaints - one finally uncovers a clear and valuable argument: when one writes fantasy in a perfunctory, mindless manner, the result is terrible fantasy ("genre fantasy"); when one writes fantasy in a creative, reflective manner, the result is magnificent fantasy ("instauration fantasy"). I can't see why the point must be shrouded with word games; and sometime in the future, if invited to join the SECRET MASTERS of this encyclopedia in planning its Second Edition, I will raise the issue again, though I may be tilting at windmills. But what else can a KNIGHT OF THE DOLEFUL COUNTENANCE do?

Gary Westfahl



REVIEWED

Who Was That Masked Writer?

John Clute

Who, it was tempting to ask upon first reading *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell, was that Masked Writer? I mean, she wasn't even young. She didn't even do e-mail touting of her own works to the sad children of the SFFWA boys-and-girls club. But, all the same, smack in the middle of the badlands of 1996, here she was, sneaking up behind us, 45 years old if she was a day, without a prior sf writing credit to her name, smiling demurely: and showed us all what a beautiful engine of thought and story the old genre was, after all. As far as the SFFWA is concerned, one suspects she must have come on the scene a bit like Little Lulu burning down the tree house.

It is always good to be reminded that the engine of our dreams can still haul freight.

Among other fully merited prizes, *The Sparrow* got a James Tiptree Memorial Award, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and others (it was not even shortlisted for the Nebula); of these, the Tiptree prize is perhaps the most fitting, though not for its feminist examination of gender – the reason a Tiptree is usually awarded.

Gender is certainly examined, after a fashion, in *The Sparrow*, just as it is in *Children of God* (Villard, \$23.95; Black Swan, \$6.99), the sequel to that stunning tale of the testing-to-destruction of a Jesuit priest making First Contact on the first planet to show signs of sentient life, and being gang-raped because he failed to understand (as *Children of God* makes clear) that to offer to give service to poets on the planet of

Rakhat is to offer to spread your cheeks, and to sweat irresistible pearls of fear and pheromone that your predator hosts imbibe like a drug.

But that – with late century sf's new-found capacity to speak directly about sex – is no more than what one might expect in an sf novel about Sleeping with Aliens: Gardner Dozois's one great novel, *Strangers* (1978), very similarly confronts humans with intolerable costs of not understanding that sex is encrypted.

What *The Sparrow* really won the Tiptree for (I hope – it certainly influenced my sense of things as one of the judges for the Clarke) was to recognize Russell's capacity to do what Tiptree accomplished at novella length but never in a full-length novel: to shape an entire book around a climax of story that can only be assembled through constant, incessant, unerring development; and to make this organ of story – this esemplasy, to use Coleridge's term for plastic imagination – come to a moral climax untellable except in these very terms precisely: a story devastatingly cumulative in its effects, a tale strung to the uttermost.

It is not quite the same with the sequel, which is in some ways a better novel than its predecessor, one certainly less easy (I'd have thought) for the Masked Writer to bring off; and even longer than *The Sparrow*. (Has it ever come to anyone's attention that Catholic writers – Russell was raised Catholic, and converted to Judaism – almost always write long? Catholic converts – G. K. Chesterton,

Graham Greene, Muriel Spark – may have a tropism to the apophthegm; but those internal aliens who were born to the Faith always seem to have to have ten feet on the ground before they can leap over the wall into the next chapter. Funny that.)

The story is far more complicated to tell than that of *The Sparrow*, and no short synopsis can convey much of its imperial and unabating sweep – so perhaps at first it's enough to say that *Children of God* is almost impossible to put down. Mary Doria Russell is an opener of the runes: she makes it new. She takes the old old stories of sf and makes them again.

From its first words, *Children of God* carries on at a run from *The Sparrow*, and this in itself is a miracle of telling, as *The Sparrow* climaxed wonderfully, and seemed to stand alone, without need of furtherance. But furthermore we get. First, we come to see that Father Emilio Sandoz's rape and humiliation and tragedy in the first novel had its origins in a linguistic misunderstanding; we follow him out of the priesthood and into marriage, at which point the plot thickens and it would be unfair to anticipate Russell's careful sequencing of revelations.

Meanwhile on Rakhat, one of those presumed killed in the paroxysm of misunderstandings that ended the first novel's action on the planet, proves (quite plausibly) to have survived. Partly through the insurgency she foments, and partly through innovations laced into events by a genius poet who has become Paramount leader, the two precariously balanced cultures of Rakhat – one of which had long cannibalized the other as part of an intricate, rather Japanese-inflected tactic designed to stabilize populations and to maintain balance – now begin to totter, a process Russell, who is a professional anthropologist, limns with telling detail. The songs which not only pace events, but in a sense constitute the workings of life on Rakhat, exfoliate dizzyingly.

Another expedition to Rakhat is mounted. Sandoz returns. Because of relativistic differences in the passage of time, the expedition only reaches the planet after many years of radical change. Genocide is avoided. The autistic son of the survivor from the first trip (Sofia Mendes) understands the world solely through song, memorizes the genetic codes of the three races into three intercalating tones, and harmonizes them. Sandoz, transfixed by this music of the spheres, comes to a settlement with the God who has so tried him.

As in *The Sparrow*, *Children of God* is an sf story about the relation-

ship between humans (and others) and God. Russell, who never fails to write long, does use excuses to retain her readers in realms of religious discourse that, to a secular reader (this one), seem at times blaringly sophisticated; and her habit of loving her characters far too much – combined with their agreeably interminable earnestness over questions of God's Will Et Al – does tend to impart a texture of feelgood bombination to a tale whose moral readouts are, as Russell fully intends them to be, harsh in the extreme.

But this – and the priggish philistinism about music so typical of sf writers (no composer later than Saint-Saens even gets mentioned by this otherwise insatiably informed and informing writer) – are the only flaws one wants to note.

The rest is a luxury of story, the riverrun we always longed for James Tiptree Jr to bathe in.

Like a very large bird trying to take off on dry land, Gore Vidal's *The Smithsonian Institution: A Novel* (Random House, \$23; Little Brown, £16.99) radiates, for a hundred pages or so, an air of slightly panic-stricken goofiness, the I-meant-to-do-that glare of an albatross in grave need of member bounce. A bit like Cary Grant in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) directed by Howard Hawks.

The reason for this is not the usual reason. Gore Vidal, whose 26th or so novel this is, does not much resemble the usual mainline writer – like P. D. James or Paul Theroux – whose attempts to write sf or fantasy always collapse humiliatingly, because they treat the fields they are embarking upon as either 1) nonexistent, which means they don't have to do any homework in order to avoid embarrassment, or 2) slums in need of redevelopment, which means – P. D. James being the worst sinner here, publishing a corruptly incompetent sf novel with the same publishers who, years earlier, had published a much finer novel by Brian Aldiss on the same subject – they can claim they're not writing sf at all, but something real instead, set in a real world, with people.

What authors like James and Theroux (and more recently Julian Rathbone) find in the sf slums is what any 19th-century bureaucrat of Empire would find in some backwater colony to which they had been unfortunately sent; what they find is what they take: the imperial philistinism of the rich. When they write sf, or fantasy, or for that matter crime novels or Gothics or westerns or Magic Realism (cf John Updike's dizzyingly estranged *Brazil* [1994]), they write as absentee owners not makers. They are art realtors. But – let us repeat – this is not what is going on here, though there are a few ditz moments.

To begin with, Gore Vidal has, for nearly 40 years now, been writing novels that, one way or another, knowingly engage with the fantastic. His first sf novel, *Messiah* (1954), for instance, gravely and slightly portentously unfolds an adagio portrait of the religious impulse gone awry as it miscegenates cruelly and destructively with a near-future secular world. Several of his later books – *Duluth* (1983) may be the most successful – play vertiginously with various reality diseases of the modern world, prefacing some of the scherzo tomfooleries of *The Smithsonian Institution*.

More importantly, Vidal's characteristic tone as a writer – knowing, camp, savage, epicurean, grainy with fatigue – is the tone of a civilized man

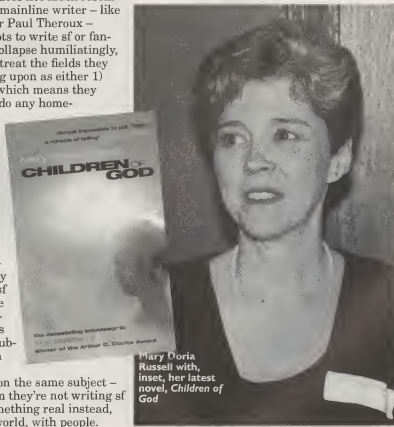
caught in the coils of late Empire. He writes as Epicurus wrote, or Petronius, or Lucian. He is a Late Roman, a chronicler of events in the arena of the last days.

Within this frame of reference, *The Smithsonian Institution* is, being full of hope, a counter-factual. Like many of Vidal's non-fantastic novels, it is a story about Washington, home of the real Smithsonian Institution, which in reality much resembles the fantasy-like Edifice that dominates this story. It is 1939, and war is imminent. Young T. (short, it turns out, for Time), is summoned to the Smithsonian on Good Friday, where he is asked to take part in a crash programme to develop a nuclear weapon before the Germans do.

But the Smithsonian Edifice is far more than a recruiting station for geniuses – T. has the ability to visualize higher mathematics, and spends some time attempting to persuade Albert Einstein that the quantum universe is real, and that no general field theory is in fact possible – it is also the locus of a series of experiments in the manipulation of space and time, or space-time, or Time Travel.

Within the Edifice, Time moves or does not move in mysterious ways. At night, the guards become wax and the dummies come to life, including all previous Presidents and their wives. The effect is of course spooky, just as it is in the alternate-history worlds of writers like Kim Newman; but it is also, at times, quite extraordinarily funny. The most hilarious character is a brain-damaged Abraham Lincoln, a version of the real Lincoln who was snatched just a fraction too late out of the reality track that ends in Booth's assassination bullet; and who tries to remember who he is through careful perusal of the works of the flutulent people-poet Carl Sandburg, the Rockwell Kent of Poets, whose hagiographic multi-volume life of Lincoln Vidal clearly despises.

T. falls in love with Frankie, a dummy come to life who is married to Grover Cleveland, who for complicated reasons doesn't mind T.'s interest. They screw a lot (not very persuasively, I thought), and stick together through the thicks and thins of the time-and-reality dance that now begins. T. wishes to change the future, in order to avert World War Two. He does so by manipulating Woodrow Wilson, whom Vidal also has little use for. The new future is less bad than the one that leads to us, but T. has for-



Picture: Paul Brazier

gotten Japan, which causes the plot to thicken.

Or, more precisely, opens more passages in the labyrinth of the story, and in the labyrinths within the Smithsonian itself. In the end, as experienced readers of certain kinds of fantasy will have long understood, both labyrinths are the same labyrinth, because *The Smithsonian Institution* is a Godgame story – that is, a story of testing and initiation, in which a master or Magus brings a young man and/or woman through ordeals in order that they become fully empowered of themselves.

Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791) is a Godgame; as is John Fowles's *The Magus* (1966), whose working title was precisely "The Godgame."

The Magus of this Godgame is James Smithson himself, the historical figure who funded the original

Institution. The Aspirant is of course T. And, as we've noted, the labyrinth of Story and the labyrinth of World that T. must trace, to come into his heritage and to gain his true love and to rule the world, are the same: the Smithsonian Institution is the story of itself. *The Smithsonian Institution* climaxes on Easter Sunday, ends in marriage bells, donates us a redeemed world. It is a counter-factual, like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), a brilliant dawn song from an old writer of great resource.

Underneath it all, of course, Gore Vidal knows the truth; and an otherwise hilarious conclave of all the dummy Presidents within the Smithsonian turns suddenly afterwards, as adults do, when Thomas Jefferson begins to speak, saying to the dummies who followed him, and who transmogrified the original States

into an Empire, that we were no longer a "virtuous republic" but...

an imperial European sort of power, bloodily transplanted to a new hemisphere and bringing with us, we now see, ancient poisons for which there are no antidotes in the Pharmacy of Time. We are Rome, indeed, Conscript Fathers.

Rome has its scribe.

John Clute

Editor's Note: The above reviews first appeared in 1998 in the on-line electronic magazine SF Weekly (<http://www.scifi.com/sfw/>). Thanks to John Clute, and to Craig Engler, editor of SF Weekly, for permission to publish them here, in slightly revised form and in conventional print for the first time.

As a genre, modern sf has come a long way since its pulp beginnings amongst the electrical diagrams and ads for trusses in Hugo Gernsback's magazines. It has gone through its Campbellian Golden Age, the comic infernos of the 1950s, New Wave and Cyberpunk. Its writers have coined words which have entered dictionaries. Perhaps half a dozen can legitimately vie for places in the canon of 20th-century literature. Historians play with alternate histories as a way of exploring the role of contingency. Governments and companies employ sf writers to evolve scenarios about the future of war or information technology. When one flicks through the cable TV channels, sf seems everywhere – in *The X-Files*, *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5* and a host of gimmicky, computer SFX-rich series, of course, and in most of the blockbuster movies and even in the ads, ads for banks and insurance companies and mobile phone companies which take on the sheen of the future to legitimize their promises.

And yet if we're honest, we're still a little embarrassed about sf. At its heart there's still that whiff of the hobbyist in the basement, an earnest didacticism, a refusal to look the world in the eye, an adolescent funk about sex. There are still the pulp adventure plots, the names spattered with apostrophes, the uncritical enthusiasms, the garish covers, the godawful liberties with science. Look at the product lined up two by two on the shelves of your local bookshop (look hard, in the chinks amongst all the epic fantasies). Ask yourself if at the heart of sf there isn't a refusal to grow up and face the world.

Look at C. S. Friedman's *The Alien Shore* (DAW, \$23.95). It's colourful and lushly-imagined space opera,

Dead Centre

Paul J. McAuley

sure, and its plot is backed up with solid research into hacking culture. It sets out to be ambitious in its scope, efficiently runs a large cast through a pinball arcade of a plot. In short, it is sf in the hardcore mode, not too much worried about the world outside the genre, speaking in tongues to thrill the initiated, and imbued with the suffocating cosiness with which, in her acknowledgements page, Friedman assumes a like-minded community at which she aims her work.

But while the setting refurbishes and regilds tropes borrowed from the treasure house of classic sf (most notably Cordwainer Smith, as Friedman acknowledges, and Frank Herbert), its real template is latter-day *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* has been accused of many things, including wholesale ransacking of prized sf tropes and of

extremely rubbery science, but its worst sin (pace Gary Westfahl's column in *IZ* 140) is surely that of turning the Universe into a vast suburban tract anchored by shopping malls, with the characters who, when they're not busy hugging and learning, police the exotic to make sure it confirms to their prejudices, like so many curtain-twitching CCTV-scanning neighbourhood-watch vigilantes.

And so here. It's the 28th century. Guild pilots have control of the spaceways, shepherding ships through rents in spacetime known as the *ainniq*. There is a loose federation of dozens of colony worlds founded with earlier superluminal technology which had the unfortunate effect of irretrievably scrambling the genes of those who used it (a trope which seems to be increasingly common, perhaps unconsciously reflecting a dislike of technology – it'll fuck you up, and fuck up your kids too). Each colony world has its own exotic variant race and all are despised by the Earth, which is in turn despised by the variants, many of whom want to exclude the Earth from their community. Except for the inhabitants of Earth, most of civilization is now clustered in vast artificial habitats, linked by an internet which bounces electronic communications through nearby *ainniq*.

But now the cybernetic Lucifer virus is loose in the internet, infecting the brainware of Guild pilots and destroying their ability to avoid the dragons which inhabit the *ainniq*. Is it the work of Earth extremists, or the tool of someone plotting within the Guild? And how is it related to Jamisia Shido, a young girl who is fleeing from a corporate war on Earth after suffering a programme of extensive experimental neurosurgery?

Jamisia, aided in her journey by a pack of multiple personalities with convenient abilities, all folded inside her head like Swiss Army knife-blades, falls in with a hacker who in turn falls in with the gravely brilliant Dr Masada, a computer expert who is tracing the virus at the behest of the head of the Guild. After a lot of exposition revolving around hacking protocols, the hand behind the virus is suddenly revealed. Poor Jamisia's fate is conveniently fixed up for her, for like the McGuffin she is, she isn't needed once the plot has run its course.

The search for the virus and Jamisia's search for the truth about herself are excuses, of course, for a journey through Friedman's space-opera future. So it's unfortunate that most of that journey is through space habitats indistinguishable from American shopping malls or *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*; the exotic gene-warped races are for the most part no more than colourful extras. And despite a lot of convincing technical exposition, Friedman's hackers are unrepentantly 20th-century mildly sociopathic American teenagers. There's mention of strings of amino acids on the DNA helix when Friedman means nucleotides, and meteorites in parking orbits when she means asteroids. Mutation doesn't work the way she thinks it does and she never does explain what the *ainniq* are, nor what the dragons which inhabit them are, nor what the dragons ate before people started throwing spaceships into their habitat. And the whole point of the plot is not, as in the best sf, to *break the frame* but to tuck everything back in place, to reassure us that Mommy knows best.

I don't mean to be too hard on C. S. Friedman. There's a lot of sf like this. Mildly diverting stuff with plot devices that were creaky when the pulps deployed them, full of wonky or just plain wrong science, their overfamiliar settings stuffed with irrelevant details of how the plumbing or credit systems work, their characters clichés unable to breathe in the straitjacket of the remorseless plot. Written straight from the labouring, leaky, sclerotic heart of sf for readers who want the future to be just like they remember it, unchallenging, uncomplicated and cosy. If the comfort of the familiar is what you're after, this is a fine example, but next to the lean, sleek rad sf of (say) Baxter, Egan and Calder, this kind of stuff seems lumbering, overstuffed and increasingly irrelevant.

Back in the 1950s and 60s, Robert Sheckley vied with Philip K. Dick as sf's premier satirist. But while



Anthony McCarten, with inset, his novel *Spinners*

Dick's reputation continues to rise after his death, Sheckley long ago reached a kind of plateau; for the most part, his novels have been less successful than the brilliant short stories with which he began his career, relying too heavily on sleight-of-hand and inventive dazzle rather than solid characterization or narrative structure. His latest novel, a hyperactive burlesque fantasy, *Godshome* (Tor, \$22.95), is a case in point, with flashes of brilliance amidst long stretches of reckless improvisation.

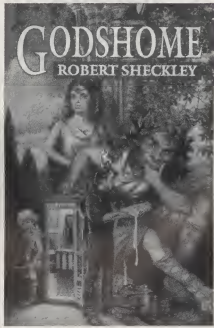
Its protagonist, Arthur Fenn, is a naive and bumbling Professor of

Comparative Mythology whose unwise investment in a gold mine, supervised by an unscrupulous stockbroker friend, lands him with huge debts. Using the Key of Solomon given to him by a colleague, Arthur calls up the gods for help and lands in Godshome, where every god who has ever existed lives, many in cantankerous retirement.

Unwisely, Arthur brings Leafy, an unbalanced trickster god, back to Earth to fix his financial problem, and soon Leafy and his friends are causing chaos, trying to satisfy their vast and disgusting appetites by setting up Arthur as the prophet of a new religion. Arthur's uptight fiancé, Mimi, flees; Sammy, the stockbroker, loves the idea; an apprentice love goddess, Mellicent, falls for Arthur when accidentally struck by Cupid's arrow; another god, Asturas, arrives to fix things while his evil brother, Ahriam, dispatches a fleet of fanatic aliens to destroy the Earth; Arthur tries to dispatch the aliens with the help of a friendly black hole, and... well, you get the idea.

When grounded on Earth, Sheckley's routines are sharp enough; Arthur, Mimi and Sammy may be stock characters, but they are portrayed with a nicely laidback wit. But the story becomes increasingly disjointed and frenetic as it hops, skips and jumps from Godshome to alien planets to black holes to universal tribunals, relying only on sheer momentum to reach the end – it's as if the ghost of Kilgore Trout, Kurt Vonnegut's ultimate sf hack, had somehow possessed Sheckley's word processor. Despite some dazzlingly inventive passages – a brief battle between gods that devastates much of the United States and ends with a punch from an angry suburbanite; Mellicent's futile search for a cure to Cupid's poison – it's an undercooked and over-egged confection spun out until enough words have accumulated to fulfil the contract, just another bit of genre shtick.

While aliens have long been a central theme of sf (indeed, they're the defining trope to those who don't actually read sf), UFOs and their crews of anal obsessives are a bit of an embarrassment, although luckily TV shows like *The X-Files* have made them the stuff of true popular culture – and *The X-Files* aren't sf, right? Right.



Here they are as the plot device in Anthony McCarten's *Spinners* (Morrow, \$24), for instance, a gently funny satire which blends elements of *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks*, but is a lot less strange than it at first seems. In a New Zealand small town whose sole industry is a vast cattle-processing plant, 16-year-old Delia Chapman claims to have had group sex with visiting spacemen. There's a squashed cow as evidence of the visit, and the incontrovertible fact that she's pregnant. And soon enough two other adolescent girls are making the same claim, scandalizing and exciting the townspeople, attracting the attention of the press, and intriguing Phillip Sullivan, the town's new librarian.

McCarten has a fine eye for the habits and peculiarities of small-town communities, and in particular for the effervescent rivalries and loyalties of adolescent girls. The mystery is teasingly spun out through Delia Chapman's resolute refusal to admit or deny anything, and the twist which resolves this gentle satire is both clever and redemptive.

But it isn't sf.

Finally, in this dry season, two short-story collections which possess genuine genre virtue.

Like Howard Waldrop or Kim Newman, Paul Di Filippo's fictions are informed by a deep and affectionate knowledge of pop culture and the more obscure nooks and crannies of

history. The stories collected in *Lost Pages* (Four Walls Eight Windows, \$15.95) glide as lightly as a pond-skater over nine alternate histories (or ten, if you count the introduction, cast as an academic article about how an alternate version of *Star Trek* killed sf, which is closer to the truth than we may like to think). All of their playful twists, often on the history of the sf genre – Joseph rather than John Campbell editing *Astounding*; President Heinlein ruling over a technocratic America; Philip K. Dick, exiled in an interdimensional limbo, a hardware-store clerk married to a teenage Linda Ronstadt – are springboards for farcical and tenderly poignant stories in which Di Filippo displays some fine mimicry and an acute ear for cultural nuance. You may have read "The Happy Valley at the End of the World," "World Wars III" and "Alice, Alfie, Ted, and the Aliens" in *Interzone*. Now read the rest.

Neil Gaiman's *Smoke and Mirrors* (Avon, \$24), which collects most of his short pieces of fiction (a dozen of which were previously published in the small press collection *Angels & Visitations*), is invested with the same playful spirit. Perhaps because, as Gaiman points out in his generous introduction (which also contains a short story), most of them were written for amusement – to amuse commissioning editors for themed anthologies, or to amuse him-

self. Perhaps because they reflect the ease with which Gaiman inhabits the conventions of genre storytelling, reworking them or turning them inside out.

Although a few of the pieces are no more than brief one- or two-page trifles, notions spun out no longer than needed (although that's an admirable skill in itself), the best carry a surprising heft and a wealth of human detail. The nostalgic evocation of 1970s school culture of "One Life, Furnished in Early Moorcock" is refracted through the alienation of its bright, Jewish protagonist; too many writers trapped in Hollywood development hell write about writers trapped in Hollywood development hell, but "The Goldfish Pool and Other Stories" is both an unusual ghost story and a neat take on the realization that Hollywood is more like Limbo than Heaven; "Snow, Glass, Apples," the best story collected here, is a dizzying and cruel reversal of a familiar fairy tale. Others, including variations on Lovecraft's Innsmouth stories ("Only the End of the World" has a memorably nasty opening), or nicely judged twists on themes as wide-ranging as parasitism ("Foreign Parts"), the myth of Lilith ("Looking for the Girl") and murder mysteries ("Murder Mysteries"), display Gaiman's restlessly omnivorous intelligence. A couple are, frankly, fragments. There are also poems, but I don't do poems. Recommended.

Paul J. McAuley

Martin Wilson's *The Castle of Oblivion* (reviewed in *Interzone* 130) was simply the best self-published novel I had ever encountered. Its sequel, *The Homunculus* (Christoffel, £5.99), carries on the story. Both novels are self-contained, with only a single common character, but read *Castle* first, as Wilson is sparing of data-dumps.

Almeric, at a loose end after the destruction of the only home he had ever known, is taken up by the mysterious Queen Gloriana of the Realm of Affine to be trained as a knight-errant. It's an unlikely vocation for a young man so physically debilitated, but as only one of enormous mental and physical reserves could have survived the first book, so be it; he is renamed Rhosyn, receives training in magic and the martial arts, and in due course sent on a quest. As his companion-in-arms is a female knight named Britomart, I wondered what devious game Wilson was playing with *The Faerie Queene*, but was none the wiser by the end of the book: it's either too deep for me, or will only get under way with the third in the series. Meanwhile there's much to enthrall.

The Best Self-Published Novels Ever?

Chris Gilmore

Gloriana's order of chivalry is like no other, being without the concept of quarter, and encompassing cannibalism of both friends and enemies as the situation demands (Rhosyn relishes that). It's based on a code of ethics which owes (as its proponents admit) something to the concepts of Utility, Prudential Altruism and Duty, but proclaims its superiority to all

three. This is well enough, but it produces the book's only serious flaw. The conclusion reached is fairly stated:

... the essence of Knightly virtue is to decide by an act of will what is good, and then by another act, or acts, to secure it. Thus, we place the seat of virtue in the power to be directed by one's will.

OK, but the other three systems are dismissed in barely two pages, which is insufficient. What I wanted at this point was a statement of axioms, followed by a logical development and exposition whereby this conclusion is reached and the inadequacies of the rival systems exposed. Illustrative quotations from Plato, Mill, Adam Smith, Nietzsche and Ayn Rand would be helpful and add to the fun, but Wilson is in too much of a hurry to get on with the story.

It's a short story, and of no great complexity, being a hunt for the homunculus which the villainous Manes created in the earlier book; but as before, its great virtue lies in Wilson's mastery of ornamentation. This is inventive and gruesome in places, and includes a clever extended

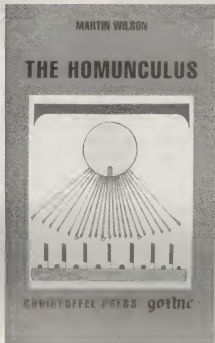
reference to Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, but the styles of wit and development have shifted away from R. A. Lafferty's territory towards that of Jack Vance. For instance, in the city of Shedlu, whither the homunculus is finally tracked down, the Helot caste consists of an entirely new class of super-natural beings: thanatoids are described as standing to androids as zombies to people, and it is by manipulating one, morally and sexually, that Rhosyn successfully concludes his quest. As it is also to her that he surrenders his virginity (I don't count the squalid episode that gave rise to the homunculus) the parallel with *Araginta Station* is obvious, nor does Wilson suffer by it; he's an accomplished and stylish writer who deserves to be better known, and I look forward avidly to the third in the series.

My review of Robin Hobb's *Ship of Magic* in *Interzone* 132 listed many virtues, notably strong characterization and deft plotting. *The Mad Ship* (Voyager, £17.99), Book Two of *The Liveship Traders*, continues the story, which is in the tradition of the great English bourgeois novel as variously exemplified by Jane Austen, Thackeray and Galsworthy.

It's a complex story – at maximum dispersion I counted seven distinct plotlines – but the underlying theme is the need to maintain (or if lost, regain) social status and the wealth necessary to sustain it; for money is unlike love – it's far worse to lose it than never to have had it. In this prudish age many people blench at such motivation, but Hobb is unabashed: the Vestrit family, having lost control of their liveship *Vivacia*, must get her back or go under, and to this end they are prepared to undertake the appalling risk of re-commissioning the mad ship *Paragon*, who has already killed two crews. Meanwhile they find themselves driven into ever more dangerous political conflicts, calling for ever more disreputable alliances, and of course, there are three love-triangles going as well, one of them involving *Vivacia* herself, her piratical new master and his acknowledged mistress.

As the book progresses some of the strands come together, but a familiar mystery becomes more insistent: What lies behind the magic of Rain Wild River? A new mystery emerges as well: What links the liveships, the sea serpents and the (legendary?) defunct? dragons?

This book has been put together with exceptional skill, deployed on a grand scale but without longueurs; I commend it to everyone, with the sin-



gle regret that no one has bothered to edit out Hobb's many simple errors of grammar. How someone so adept in so many difficult areas fails in such easy ones is inexplicable to me, but this book deserves to stay in print a long time; perhaps someone will tidy up a later edition. (I'd relish the job.) Meanwhile, may you all live to enjoy the concluding volume, even with occasional gritting of teeth.

Writing in *Interzone* 110, I was less than complimentary about Nancy Kilpatrick's vampire novel *Child of the Night*. It was idiot-plotting, the writing (except about clothes)

was leaden and the characters dim. Someone must have liked it though, because Pumpkin Books has now reissued it plus two more in a uniform series at £6.99 & \$12.

Near Death (from 1996) has much the same defects though the characters are more engaging. Essentially it's a puzzle story: Why should a pimp from New York want to kill a harmless vampire from Cheshire? And given that he does, why assign the contract to an airhead, headpuck hooker rather than a hard man from Moss Side? Naturally she fails, and naturally her victim falls for her waifish charm. There follows some 250 pages of romance, violence and soft porn, garnished with snatches of Byron and affording Kilpatrick ample scope to describe fetish gear for all occasions and tastes. Fine if you like that sort of thing, but the writing and plotting are still lamentably weak.

That brings us to the latest, *Reborn*. The series is by now taking on the character of a *roman fleuve* with the general title of *Power of the Blood*, but its quality has fallen yet lower. Kilpatrick seems positively averse to writing a minimally graceful sentence, and it was no surprise at all that she acknowledges the "love and other help" of 29 friends and comforters. A book written by a committee of the non-judgmental has little chance at the best of times, and none of this lot seems to know that methanol is another word for methyl alcohol, or that Mandarin is the name of a dialect, not a script, or that gravity is contingent on mass, not illumination – but who's counting, when love is in the air?

Vampire fiction has been non-cerebral since the days of Varney, and the vampire/victim relationship must, by definition, appeal to the sadomasochists among us. OK, but to read even one sentence of such studied ineptitude as "He did not look a day over twenty-five yet he had walked around on *terra firma* more than six times those years," takes masochism beyond sane limits. Kilpatrick has hundreds like it. In short, this is a load of bilge by a writer who has turned her back on whatever slender talent she may once have had, and to condemn it in any milder terms would be to devalue my praise for Wilson and Hobb.

Sometimes you just can't get on grips with a book, because you can't swallow the writer's assumptions. That was my problem with Alison Sinclair's *Cavalcade* (Millennium, £16.99), though the plot is simple. A huge alien spaceship takes up orbit above the Earth, and offers an invitation: anyone who cares





to stand by the sea on a particular night will be beamed up. Absolutely nothing is promised about what they will find or how they will be greeted, let alone if any will ever be beamed back down; even so, some hundreds of thousands take their chance.

Aboard, they find a system of artificial caves which offer a sparse but habitable environment, and Sinclair follows their fortunes as they set about exploring its potential, singly and in groups. As the potential is always just what Sinclair needs to move the plot along, the whole business gets more arbitrary as it approaches its sentimental ending,

Fantasy novels, I sometimes think, are historical novels for a generation that knows nothing about history – or, perhaps, doesn't want to know. In its popular form, the historical novel has always been a novel of retreat, of escape. Escape from what? From history, of course. Science. Progress. It can't be an accident that the historical novel was at its height during the early industrial era. As England's green and pleasant land filled up with railway lines and belching chimneys, who were our ancestors reading? Sir Walter Scott, that's who, not to mention Harrison Ainsworth, Bulwer Lytton and G. P. R. James; G. W. M. Reynolds, totally forgotten today, was the biggest of the lot, and more popular than Dickens.

The formula doesn't work so well now. Write a romance set in the days of Richard the Lionheart or Dick Turpin, and you won't get far. But make up a cod-historical world of your own, and you might just be the new Brooks, Eddings or Jordan. We don't much like real history, it seems, or even history decked out in tinsel. Its glamour has tarnished, and besides, the trouble with history is where it ends up – that is, here. Now. The fantasy novel – all these worlds "where magic really works" – restores us to history as wonder and myth.

Juliet E. McKenna's first novel, *The Thiefs Gamble* (Orbit, £5.99), is set in a world perhaps intended to suggest the 17th or 18th centuries, though the feeling is mostly medieval. Centuries have passed since the fall of the Tormalin Empire, "the greatest cataclysm ever to befall a civilization." Authority resides with corrupt, decadent feudal lords, but there is also – corresponding to the medieval church – a powerful caste of mages, who draw their magic from the four elements. But the mages aren't as strong as they'd like to be. In the days of the empire, far superior magic was abroad in the world. Now it seems that certain antiquities

but the groups are my problem. Some are scientific adventurers, prepared to risk all for love of knowledge; some have suffered misfortunes (not always of their own making), and hope for a better deal elsewhere; some are fools who have rushed in. Well enough, but can you imagine such an invitation failing to attract a good proportion of the world's nuttiest cultists? The absence of so much as a single Scientologist, let alone anything in the chiliastic line, leaves a void which Sinclair's reasonably rational, sometimes attractive, always interesting people are quite incapable of filling.

That aside, the story lacks shape

and moves far too slowly, as the aliens keep hidden and most of the conflicts which arise are resolved by realistic but unsatisfactory means: everyone takes turns to harangue everyone else, in what read like over-rehearsed set speeches; no one is convinced; all go back to the various communities which have sprung up. When violence finally erupts it's all over in one battle, the defending side having every advantage. There's a singular lack of sexual tension as well, the only girl who shows much promise in that line being six months pregnant, and out of it *pro tem*. In short, too many stuffed shirts and too few nutters for credibility.

Chris Gilmore

History-Fantasy

Tom Arden

– goblets and the like – hold psychic clues to the past. The mages send out their agents, bent on rounding up various bits of Tormalin bric-à-brac which, they hope, shall provide vital clues to the powers of the empire – and to why the empire fell.

Into all this, quite by accident, stumbles McKenna's heroine, the tomboyish (but decidedly heterosexual) thief and gambler, Livak. When Livak steals one of the missing relics, she lands herself in the middle of an adventure that leads her hither and yon across the old empire, and eventually over the seas to a climax on the mysterious islands of the Ice Men.

Orbit are pushing McKenna heavily. The cover carries a commendation from J. V. Jones, and like Jones, McKenna is a writer of crisp, straightforward fantasy adventure of

the sort which drives serious sf folk crazy. To her credit, McKenna doesn't simply glamorize the past. There are starving peasants, slops thrown from windows, brothels, mud, horseshit, rats, lice and fleas. Only when it comes to sex does realism forsake her. Disease is no problem, and there's even a convenient herbal potion which acts just like the contraceptive pill – which perhaps explains why the heroine seems to have taken her sexual attitudes from a 1970s issue of *Cosmopolitan*. When her toy-boy lover – whom she treats just as men, conventionally, are supposed to treat women – is kidnapped, it's supposed to be a crisis, but since Livak has just been wondering how to let the silly boy down lightly, it's hard to see why she's so worried. The way in which the author contrives to get rid of the young fellow in the end, incidentally, is particularly nasty.

Livak is a sort of cartoon version of Moll Flanders. As such, she's diverting in places, but every so often doesn't one tire, just a little, of these heroines who are forever wisecracking, swearing, screwing around, and splitting open skulls with swords – when, that is, they're not zapping aliens, piloting starships or expertly reeling off scientific theories? We're supposed to live in an age of feminism, but sometimes it seems that manliness is the only thing we admire – except, of course, in men. Fantasyland would be more fun if everyone didn't have to be so butch.

Fantasy novels and historicals have more in common than their mutual mission to escape the here and now. Both genres, and horror too, have their origins in the gothic fiction of the late 18th century. In the gothic, with its pastebored castles, set in a vaguely-realized medieval Europe, were as close to modern fantasy as we are to horror. But it was the gothic, too, that first fuelled the taste for historical romance. From Ann Radcliffe

to Walter Scott is not so big a step; the difference is that Scott actually knew something about history.

The High House by James Stoddard (Earthlight, £5.99) is a novel rooted firmly in the gothic tradition, but opening out onto vast fantastical vistas. In McKenna's novel, real history is replaced by the author's imaginary history; in Stoddard's, the refusal of history is more profound. The novel is apparently set in the real world, but as it happens the action is entirely restricted to Evenmere, the "high house" of the title, a sinister, rambling mansion in which nothing is as it seems. Only in the form of books – the young hero reads, among others, Stevenson, Haggard and William Morris – does the outside world impinge upon Evenmere. This is appropriate: Stoddard's world is an entirely literary one, an artifice built from his reading.

The story, beginning with a young boy growing up in a mysterious house, evokes memories of classic gothic tales from "William Wilson" to *Titus Groan*. Within pages, things get more bizarre. Young Carter's father has a key on a brass ring, which opens a particular green door; in fairy-tale fashion, he warns the boy never to try this door. One day, while Carter is in the garden, a stranger dressed in the garb of "an English bobby" speaks to him over the garden wall. Mysteriously, the bobby knows about the green door, and tempts Carter to steal the key. Carter soon regrets this folly. Behind the door is a terrifying labyrinth, where the bobby lies in wait to abduct him. The high house, it emerges, is the secret powerhouse of the universe. If its clocks are not wound and its lamps are not lit, the universe will run down. The bobby is the head of the "Society of Anarchists," a group dedicated to bringing chaos. Soon Carter's father is missing, and Carter must fight the bobby alone. The adventures that follow are progressively more outlandish. A dinosaur lives in the attic. Sofas turn into savage monsters. Doors open onto magical lands.

This is a literate and allusive first novel of considerable ambition and imaginative reach. It also has an appealing innocence and charm, so much so that one is loath to disparage it. There are, however, two objections to the book. First, that it contains not enough reality; second, that it contains too much fantasy. The hardest things to write in a novel are the boring bits – that is, the relatively dull stretches in which nothing exciting is happening. Stoddard avoids this problem by having no boring bits; unfortunately, if a novel is too exciting, it gets boring anyway. Fantasti-

cal imaginings, as in Stephen King's work, acquire much of their impact from contrast: here, we see, is ordinary life; there – suddenly, surprisingly – is the bizarre. In *The High House*, everything is bizarre. The novel therefore has something of the sickly overabundance of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*; something, too, one might add, of its jejune and religiose moral polarities. Here's good: there's evil: let's defeat it. Which we do. There's a lot of talk about God at the end.

Stoddard's is a brand of gothic fantasy that turns determinedly away from real history, inhabiting a timeless realm of moral absolutes. Chaz Brenchley, in a remarkable chapbook *The Keys to D'Esperance* (Subterranean Press, PO Box 190106, Burton, MI 48519, USA; \$10 plus p&p), uses gothic devices in a very different way.

Brenchley is among the best of younger genre writers, but after nine adult novels and innumerable short stories, he remains less well-known than he ought to be. If there is a reason for this, I think it is that Brenchley is difficult to pin down. Publishers love categories; if the way to literary success is to do one thing that works, then do it again and again. Brenchley has hardly followed the easy route to fame. His hard-edged contemporary thrillers have been published variously as crime and horror; to complicate matters, his recent novel *Tower of the King's Daughter* (reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 140) is the first volume in an epic fantasy

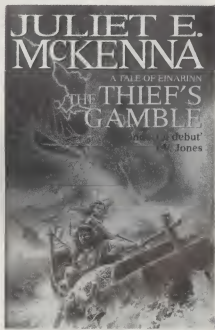
series. But I don't think Brenchley is simply eclectic. In essence, it seems to me, his work is neither fantasy nor horror, let alone crime, but gothic of a literary rather than generic sort, using lurid, grotesque and bizarre subject-matter not for their own sakes, but as metaphors for the darkness in the human heart.

The Keys to D'Esperance illustrates this well. A young Englishman, whose name we never learn, has been told all his life that one day he will inherit a country house called D'Esperance. He has never seen the house and knows nothing about it; questions to his elders are to no avail. The house is like God, a promise that seems unlikely ever to be fulfilled; the young man soon loses his faith. When the story opens, the First World War has just ended. The young man's parents, and the girl he loved, are all dead. The young man decides to drown himself. Then, quite unexpectedly, he receives a package from a solicitor. It contains the keys to D'Esperance. The young man travels into the bleak north country, to view his inheritance just once before he dies.

What follows is a bizarre and disturbing tale of guilt, shame and psychological terror, told in a brilliantly poetic and impressionistic style. Like *The High House*, the story is filled with echoes of previous literature. D'Esperance may remind us of Udolpho, the House of Usher, and Manderley; also, perhaps of those great houses in Jane Austen which represent the condition of England. Brenchley conveys an aching sense of the English past, a past now lost irrevocably after the cataclysm of the First World War. Whether we should see a national malaise mirrored in young man's rootless, suicidal state, and subsequent breakdown, is a moot point, but it is a measure of the quality of the story that it leaves such questions echoing in one's mind.

The chapbook, it's worth adding, is beautifully designed and also contains an interesting introduction by Peter Crowther, reflecting not only on Brenchley's work but on the horror genre in general. Brenchley has said that *The Keys to D'Esperance* is only the first of a series of stories, intended to encompass the history of England in the 20th century through the history of the house. One can only hope that he continues the series. This is fantasy and history, working together to powerful emotional effect.

Tom Arden



Visit Tom Arden online: <http://www3.mistral.co.uk/tom.arden/>

If *Interzone* is a magazine of science fiction and fantasy, then perhaps *Odyssey* is a magazine of fantasy and science fiction. It certainly puts greater emphasis on the former, with regular columns on fantasy role-playing games and a video review section almost entirely devoted to Manga animations (a taste I haven't yet acquired).

Co-publishers David Ryan and Hawk Norton, together with Editor Liz Holliday founded the magazine in 1997 to offer fantasy writers a new paying market for fiction. The result is an invigorating, entertaining magazine produced in an immaculate A4 glossy format. To date *Odyssey* has failed to keep up its (originally proposed) bi-monthly schedule and has, as far as I can determine, been appearing quarterly. During its first two years of publication, *Odyssey* has published fiction by Brian Stableford, Stephen Baxter, Ian Watson, Mary Gentle and many other contributors familiar to readers of this magazine. I would, however, stress that *Odyssey* cannot be classed as a "rival" to *IZ*. The stories it publishes are very different from those in *Interzone*, and even the pieces from *IZ* semi-regulars like Ben Jeapes and Charles Stross are in an altogether different vein from those published by the same authors here.

Issue #6 sees "Blue Sky Science" contributor Jeff Hecht discussing the likelihood of an asteroid hitting the earth. This "doom-warden" talk is brought about by the hype machine of Hollywood blockbuster *Armageddon*, in which a "Texas-sized" rock is due to send us all careering back to the Stone Age. The piece is quite alarming and sets the mood for an unusually pessimistic issue of this immaculately-produced sf magazine. Sadly I found much of the fiction tedious, with the exception of "Extracts from the Club Diary: 1889 to 2019," an entertaining tale of addiction from the ever-reliable Charles Stross. The reviews section in #6 is largely concerned with comic fantasy, including an in-depth analysis of Terry Pratchett's new *G.U.R.P.S. (General User Roleplaying System)*. *Discworld* and an enthusiastic examination of Tom Holt, Andrew Harman, Robert Rankin and James Bibby.

I do have one grumble, however; since issue #0 *Odyssey* has been marred by typing mistakes, grammatical errors and some of the sloppiest line-editing I have ever seen in a professional publication. In #2 a Stephen Baxter interview was distorted by a terrible coupling of words ("meetwriters," "hugefactory," etc). I do feel that if greater care is taken on these points, success will be assured.

Magazine Reviews

David Lee Stone

In #6 the mistakes are fewer but I had to suppress a chuckle when I discovered that Tony Hough, one of my favourite cover-artists from *White Dwarf*, made his first professional sale in 1897... (Best wishes to Tony and his wife who, at the time of *Odyssey* #6 going to print, were expecting their first child.)

The *Zone* is into its fifth year of publication, no mean feat for a small-press magazine. Relying largely on a core of regular subscribers and single issues purchased from the NSFA, editor Tony Lee produces an A4-size magazine that manages to be at one and the same time informative and challenging. Issue #6 covers a wide range of sf-related topics and is, quite literally, packed full of information. Unfortunately much of this is produced as straight wedges of text in a ludicrously small font (Courier 10, if I'm any judge) which does tend to strain the eyes.

Duncan Lawrie kicks off the issue with a short but capable interview with novelist Paul J. McAuley and, in "Genre Greats" Rhys Hughes offers up an informative profile of Barrington Bayley. These are the main features of the magazine and many of the remaining articles are a little obscure (two small-press writers listing their top ten books and a decidedly offbeat history of sf poetry by

Steve Sneyd). Apart from Robert Reed's "Watercolours" (a reprint from US magazine *Tomorrow SF*) the fiction is pretty average stuff but, essentially *The Zone* is not a fiction magazine. It has an exhaustive and informative review section covering just about every sf/fantasy release during the six months prior to publication. Overall, I wish *The Zone* good luck. It is a worthwhile magazine and one that should be supported.

Voyage is a new magazine covering many genres; in issue #2 you will find sf and fantasy short stories alongside humorous poetry and a lengthy article extolling the virtues of Venezuela. It is produced in an A5 glossy format with splashes of colour every few pages to brighten up the text. Unfortunately *Voyage* is not a publication I'm able to be particularly enthusiastic about, despite the obvious expense on presentation. JGD Publishing are (or so it would appear) a printing firm and here is where my major gripe arises; *Voyage* is produced exactly like a pamphlet advertising colour and monochrome printing. Every page looks like an example of scanned copy and so the magazine has no identity and no format defining its ideas. The text pieces are arranged haphazardly and the articles are broken up by increasingly obscure advertisements from a firm of consultants and a swimming-pool installation company. These points detract from the quality of the magazine's content, which is not bad for a fledgling publication. Highlights for me included Clifford Thurlow's "Cheats," Veronica Perry's atmospheric "Waiting For Louis" and "The Land That Time Forgot," an informative travel piece by Jon De La Mare. In conclusion, I would encourage JGD Publishing to make more effort in forging their magazine an identity with issue #3; the result could well be worth watching.

Odyssey (A4, 72pp, £3.75 from Partizan Press, 816-818 London Road, Leigh on Sea, Essex SS9 3NH; USA \$5.95 from On Military Matters, 55 Taylor Terrace, Hopewell, NJ 08525. All monies payable to "Caliver Books")

The Zone (A4, 68pp, £3.20 from Tony Lee, Pegasus Press, 13 Hazelycombe, Arreton, Isle of Wight PO30 3AJ; USA \$8.50 from Janet Stephenson at New SF Alliance). All monies payable to "Tony Lee")

Voyage (A5, 58pp, £5.00 from John Dunne, Regent Chambers, 40 Lichfield Street, Wolverhampton WV1 1DG. All monies payable to "JGD")

David Lee Stone

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers. **Muse of Art: Geodyssey, Volume 4**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86896-0, 445pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; we saw the second book in this series, *Shore of Man*, in 1994, on which occasion we wrote: "a follow-up to *Isle of Womans*... it would be inaccurate to call the second book a sequel to the first, since it actually begins its very episodic narrative some millions of years earlier and then does a retake on the span of human history which was covered in volume one; there are hundreds of prehistoric romances being published these days, but Anthony is attempting something more ambitious [if damnably difficult] in these books, and he deserves credit for it"; unfortunately, we were not sent volume three, which apparently was called *Hape of Earth*; the series has not been published in Britain; nor have we seen these novels reviewed or discussed anywhere, though they seem to be Anthony's most serious fiction of recent decades.) May 1999.

Baxter, Stephen. **Mammoth, Book 1: Silverhair**. Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-410-9, 277pp, hardcover, cover by Fangorn, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £9.99 [not seen]; strictly speaking, this book would seem to be called *Silverhair*, but the cover gives the title simply as *Mammoth*.) 21st January 1999.

Baxter, Stephen. **Webcrash**. "The Web." Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-632-7, 115pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £3.50. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; Baxter's second "Web" novella, this is the first in the series that we have seen in some time; others mentioned in the listing at the back, which we appear to have missed, include *Spindrift* by Maggie Furey and *Camputopia* by James Lovegrove; see also *Cydanis* by Ken MacLeod, below.) Late entry: 1998 publication, received in January 1999.

Bibby, James. **Ronan's Revenge: Painfully Translated from the Original Gibberish**. Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-748-5, 245pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Davies, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1998; the author's third volume of Pratchett-lookalike stuff.) Late entry: 28th December 1998 publication, received in January 1999.

Bova, Ben. **Colony**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79315-6, 499pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1978.) January 1999.

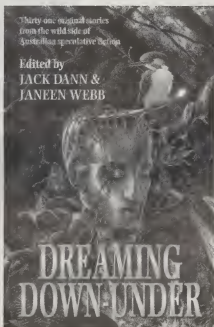
Broderick, Damien, ed. **Not the Only Planet: Science Fiction Travel Stories**.

Lonely Planet [10a Spring Lane, London NW5 3BH], ISBN 0-7322-5917-7, 250pp, B-format paperback, cover by David O'Brien, £6.99. (Sf anthology, first published in Australia, 1998; this is the Australian first edition with a British release date and price; it contains all-reprint stories [on a vaguely "travel" theme, befitting a publisher of travel books] by Brian Aldiss, Stephen Dedman, Greg Egan, Lisa Goldstein, Garry Kilworth, Joanna Russ, Robert Silverberg, John Varley and Gene Wolfe; the Paul J. McAuley story, "All Tomorrow's Parties," is reprinted from *Interzone*; recommended.) January 1999.

Card, Orson Scott. **Enchantment**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41687-2, 390pp, hardcover, \$25. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the publisher's letter describes it as "a fantasy combining Russian myth and modern American sensibility, and the lives of a Jewish émigré and a Catholic princess.") April 1999.

Constantine, Storm. **The Oracle Lips: A Collection**. Introduction by Michael Moorcock. Stark House [1945 P St., Eureka, CA 95501, USA], ISBN 0-9667848-0-4, 398pp, hardcover, cover by Cambell Shepard, \$45. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains 23 stories and a poem; one item, "The Rust Islands," first appeared in *Interzone*; six items are previously unpublished anywhere; finished copies will be signed and numbered; a fine fat collection, comparable in heft – and literary merit – to the recent Rachel Pollack volume *Burning Sky* [Cambrian Publications, 1998]; thank God for small presses like Cambrian and Stark House; it says "1998" inside this proof, but the accompanying review slip states that it is a 1999 release.) 21st March 1999.

Dann, Jack, and Janeen Webb, eds. **Dreaming Down-Under**. Preface by Harlan Ellison. Voyager, ISBN 0-7322-5917-7, xii+554pp, C-format paperback, cover by Nick Stathopoulos, no price shown. (Sf/fantasy anthology,

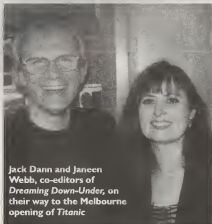


BOOKS RECEIVED



JANUARY
1999

first edition; this is an Australian HarperCollins publication, not published in Britain to the best of our knowledge; it contains over 200,000 words of all-original stories by Australian and New Zealand authors, including Damien Broderick, Isobelle Carmody, Stephen Dedman, Sara Douglass, Terry Dowling, David J. Lake, Rosaleen Love, Dirk Strasser, Lucy Sussex, the late George Turner [a lengthy but unfinished piece], Cherry Wilder, Sean Williams and many others; unfortunately, the best sf writer in Australia [and the world], Greg Egan, is conspicuous by his absence; that well-known non-Aussie, Harlan Ellison, has been roped in mainly to apologize for the non-appearance of a big Australian sf anthology which he was supposed to have co-edited with Terry Dowling over a decade ago.) Late entry: 1998 publication not actually received for review but kindly sent to us by one of the contributors, Sean McMullen, in January 1999.



Jack Dann and Janeen Webb, co-editors of *Dreaming Down-Under*, on their way to the Melbourne opening of *Titanic*

Picture: Paul Brazier



Danvers, Dennis. **Circuit of Heaven.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79092-0, 373pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1998; this one, about a virtual society of "uploaded personalities," seems to have gained good reviews in the States last year.) *January 1999.*

Drake, David. **Lord of the Isles.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-591-5, 625pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; the first of a series; Drake is well established as an sf author [Hammer's Slammers, etc.], and has written some fantasy before now [The Dragon Lord, etc.]) *21st January 1999.*

Gaiman, Neil. **Day of the Dead: A Babylon 5 Script.** Introduction by J. Michael Straczynski. Dream-Haven Books [912 West Lake St., Minneapolis, MN 55408, USA], ISBN 1-892058-02-2, 55pp, very large-format paperback, \$12.95. (SF TV-series script, first edition; "10% of the cover price goes to support the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.") *Late entry: December 1998 publication received in January 1999.*

Haining, Peter, ed. **The Flying Sorcerers: More Comic Tales of Fantasy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-725-0, 372pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £5.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in 1997; 24 reprint stories, including work by, among others, Piers Anthony, Robert Bloch, Fredric Brown, Angela Carter, Arthur C. Clarke, John Collier, Roald Dahl, L. Sprague de Camp, Thomas M. Disch, Harry Harrison, Stephen Leacock, Stanislaw Lem, C. S. Lewis, Michael Moorcock, Mervyn Peake and the inevitable Terry Pratchett; a good line-up, which also includes work by Eric Knight [one of his Sam Small, the Flying Yorkshireman, stories from the 1940s] and P. G. Wodehouse [one of his Mulliner stories from the 1920s]; as usual in this series of anthologies, Haining mixes humorous sf in with the fantasy — one notable rare item this time is Leacock's "The Man in Asbestos," from 1911 [Haining says "1917" — as usual, his bibliographical notes are duff.]) *4th February 1999.*

Haldeman, Joe. **The Forever War.** "SF Masterworks, 1." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-808-6, 254pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1974; a Hugo and Nebula award-winner in its day, this edition has a new two-page "Author's Note" and apparently contains a revised version of the text which first appeared in America in 1991; this is the first in a commendable new series of paperback reprints, similar to the old Gollancz "SF Classics" series of the 1980s [in fact, Orion Publishers now own the Gollancz imprint name, and are merging it with their Millennium imprint.]) *January 1999.*

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat.** Millennium, ISBN 0-85798-498-6, 185pp, A-format paperback, cover by Walter Velez, £4.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1961; the first of the Slippery Jim diGriz adventures, from what now seems a very long time ago.) *Late entry: 28th December 1998 publication, received in January 1999.*

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat Goes to Hell.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-719-1, 245pp, A-format paperback, cover by Walter Velez, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the most recent Slippery Jim diGriz book.) *Late entry: 28th December 1998 publication, received in January 1999.*



Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat's Revenge.** Millennium, ISBN 0-85798-499-4, 199pp, A-format paperback, cover by Walter Velez, £4.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1970; the second Slippery Jim diGriz book.) *Late entry: 28th December 1998 publication, received in January 1999.*

Hartwell, David G., and Glenn Grant. **Northern Stars.** "The New Anthology of Canadian Science Fiction." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86461-2, 382pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (SF anthology, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *Northern Stars* [1994], it contains reprint stories by Canadian-born or Canadian-resident authors, including Margaret Atwood, Alain Bergeron, Eric Choi, Cory Doctorow, the late Robertson Davies, Nalo Hopkinson, Jan Lars Jensen, Nancy Kilpatrick, W. P. Kinsella, Scott Mackay, Derryl Murphy, Ursula Pflug and Karl Schroeder, among others [the line-up is completely different from last time, no doubt to prove the point that Canada has plenty of sf and fantasy writers]; one piece, Geoff Ryman's "Fan," first appeared in *Interzone*; as before, a few of the stories are translated from the French language; there is also a reprint essay by John Clute, and notes and appendices by the editors; recommended.) *April 1999.*

Herbert, James. **Others.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-76117-0, 430pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; bestseller Herbert has switched to

a new publisher with this latest opus; they tell us that his books "have sold more than 42 million copies worldwide.") *16th April 1999.*

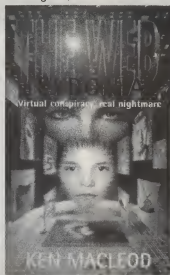
Jacoby, Kate. **Voice of the Demon: Second Book of Elita.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06525-7, 478pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Sullivan, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author is Australian-born, and the book is copyrighted in the name of Tracey Oliphant.) *18th March 1999.*

Jeter, K. W. **Noir.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-596-6, 388pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1998; it seems to be a return to Jeter's early, cyberpunkish *Dr Adder* mode.) *21st January 1999.*

Kessel, John, Mark L. Van Name and Richard Butner, eds. **Intersections: The Sycamore Hill Anthology.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86384-5, 384pp, trade paperback, \$16.95. (SF/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1996; "Sycamore Hill" is the name of a writers' conference at which all these stories were first workshopped; contributors include Carol Emshwiller, Karen Joy Fowler, Gregory Frost, Alexander Jablokov, Nancy Kress, James Patrick Kelly, Jonathan Lethem, Maureen F. McHugh and Bruce Sterling, among others; each story is followed, workshop-style, by comments from all the other contributors.) *8th January 1999.*

Linaweaver, Brad, and Edward E. Kramer, eds. **Free Space.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86720-4, 352pp, trade paperback, \$16.95. (SF anthology, first published in the USA, 1997; it's dedicated to Robert and Ginny Heinlein, and contains mainly new stories by Poul Anderson, John Barnes, Gregory Benford, William F. Buckley [a reprint from 1975], Arthur Byron Cover, Peter Crowther, James P.

Hogan, Victor Koman, Robert J. Sawyer, L. Neil Smith, William F. Wu and others; there are also poems by Ray Bradbury, Wendy McElroy [referred to, cringe-makingly, by editor Linaweaver as "the only babe I managed to talk between the covers of this book"] and Robert Anton Wilson; with names like Buckley's and Koman's in the title, the Heinlein dedication and the code-word "free" in the title, one detects a right-wing libertarian agenda; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 123.) *Late entry: 1st December 1998 publication received in January 1999.*



Lisle, Holly. **Diplomacy of Wolves: The Secret Texts, Book 1.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-584-2, 332pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £9.99

[not seen]; this, we believe, is Lisle's first book to appear in Britain.) 21st January 1999.

McAuley, Paul J. **Child of the River: The First Book of Confluence**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60168-X, 350pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1997; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 125.) Late entry: 1998 publication not actually received for review but bought by us in a Brighton second-hand bookshop, January 1999.

McCaffrey, Anne. **The MasterHarper of Pern**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14274-3, 463pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Weston, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; a "Dragonriders" book.) 11th February 1999.

MacLeod, Ken. **Cydonia**. "The Web." Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-640-8, 114pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £3.50. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; see comments under Stephen Baxter, above.) Late entry: 1998 publication, received in January 1999.

Matheson, Richard. **I Am Legend**. "SF Masterworks, 2." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-809-4, 160pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jim Thiesen, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1954; this was famously a Fawcett Gold Medal paperback original 'way back in the dim and distant '50s; filmed at least twice, it seems to be wearing well, judging by the number of reissues over the years; this is the second in the commendable new series of classic sf titles from Orion/Millennium.) January 1999.

Mathews, Susan R. **Hour of Judgment**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-80314-3, 260pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it appears to be a follow-up to the author's previous two novels, *An Exchange of Hostages* and *Prisoner of Conscience*, set in the same spacefaring future; the feel is of an unlikely cross between *Star Trek* and — given that it has an anguished healer/torturer hero — Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*; the author has a degree in psychology and has worked as an "operations security officer" in the U.S. Army.) January 1999.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Spellings War**. "Book Two of The Spellings Cycle." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-726-9, ix+656pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mervyn Grant, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 4th February 1999.

Mosley, Walter. **Blue Light**. Serpent's Tail, ISBN 1-85242-611-X, 296pp, trade paperback [?], £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; proof copy received; the author is a well-known Californian crime novelist, and this, so far as we know, is his first foray into sf; the publishers have sent us a rather minimal unbound proof, presumably photocopied from the American pages, so it's not clear whether they're doing this as a cheap hardcover or as an expensive paperback original —

or whether it will have the same pagination.) 8th April 1999.

Norton, Andre, and Rosemary Edghill. **The Shadow of Albion**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86427-2, 350pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's set during "a Regency that never was" and the cover blurb describes it as "a romping tale of court intrigue and political machinations to rival *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.) April 1999.

Paxson, Diana L. **The Book of the Sword: The Hallowed Isle, Book One**. "A Novel of King Arthur." Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78870-5, 181pp, trade paperback, \$10. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; it's very short, but the first of a tetralogy: perhaps this is a single blockbuster which the publishers decided to release in four parts?) February 1999.

Preston, Lincoln. **Riptide**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81189-4, 522pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/horror thriller, first published in the USA, 1998; proof copy received; "Lincoln Preston" is a pseudonym for Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child; we are informed that their earlier novel *The Relic* has now sold "over 1.5 million copies.") 6th May 1999.

Salvatore, R. A. **The Demon Apostle**. "The stunning conclusion to the Demon Wars trilogy." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39153-5, viii+455pp, hardcover, \$25. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) March 1999.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Alien Years**. Voyager, ISBN 0-S86-21110-1, 453pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1998; about an alien invasion of the Earth, it's dedicated: "For H. G. Wells, the father of us all.") 1st February 1999.

Soukup, Martha. **The Arbitrary Placement of Walls**. Introduction by Neil Gaiman. DreamHaven Books [912 West Lake St., Minneapolis, MN 55408, USA], ISBN 0-9630944-8-3, xiv+206pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1997; Soukup is one of the more highly-praised of the newer American short-story writers; we missed this book in hardcover: it contains 17 pieces, reprinted from *Amazing*, *Analogue*, *Asimov's*, *SF*, *SF Age* and various original anthologies.) Late entry: November 1998 publication received in January 1999.

Stone, Dave. **The Mary-Sue Extrusion**. "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-

20531-6, 243pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Shared-universe of novel, first edition; it features the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who], created by Paul Cornell.) 18th February 1999.

Telep, Peter. **Descent**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-79306-7, 298pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf spinoff novel, based on a computer game; first edition; it's copyright "Parallax Software"; we once speculated, with respect to a novelization of the TV show *Space: Above and Beyond*, that Peter Telep was a pseudonym of Timothy Zahn, but that appears not to be the case; according to the note at the back of this book Telep lives in Florida and works as "an expert produce clerk, having spent many years in various supermarkets to support his writing habit.") January 1999.

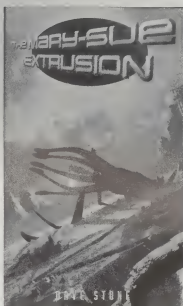
Thomas, Matthew. **Before & After**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648302-X, 426pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a 29-year-old Welsh writer, the cover strapline describes it as "a novel about exploding heads, Nostradamus and the end of the world" — in other words, an invasion of Robert Rankin territory.) 1st February 1999.

Vance, Jack. **Ports of Call**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648212-0, 300pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 136.) 15th February 1999.

Weis, Margaret, and Don Perrin. **Hung Out**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60069-1, 384pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK [?], 1998; a third novel about Xris Cyborg and his Mag Force 7 team, in the adventure series which began with *The Knights of the Black Earth* and *Robot Blues*.) 18th February 1999.

Williamson, Jack. **The Silicon Dagger**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86540-6, 303pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; see the Jack Williamson interview in *Interzone* 139, where this book was rather prematurely described as forthcoming in "late 1998.") April 1999.

Zindell, David. **War in Heaven: A Requiem for Homo Sapiens, Book Three**. Voyager, ISBN 0-S86-21191-8, 791pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 136.) 15th February 1999.



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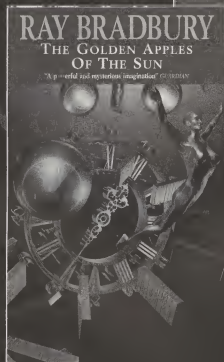
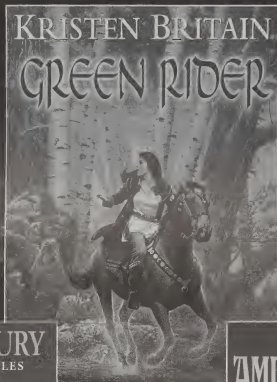
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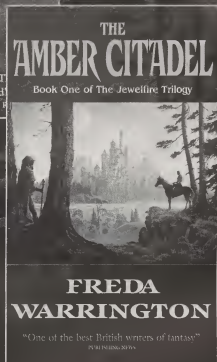


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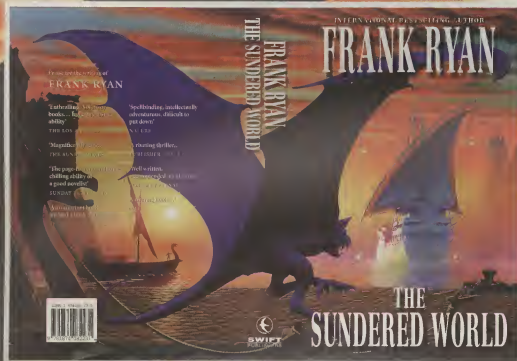
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